

Nobody Wants A Soulmate

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Nobody Wants A Soulmate

by [Wywrd Artemis](#)

Summary

In theory, having a soulmate is a wonderful thing. However, Dream hopes he never meets his. He would swear off the idea of love all together if he could. The problem is, he's accidentally fallen in love with his best friend, George. And the more Dream tries to suppress his feelings, the more deeply he finds himself falling for George. Why does this soulmate nonsense have to make everything so much more complicated?

Notes

pls remember to respect the irl people! this is just a work of fiction for fun, no harm meant

this is my first time writing dnf and ima be real im terrified to post this ghfdjhgsd. i have a few more chapters written and plans for a full story, but for now i just wanna test the waters with chap 1. pls let me know what you think & if youd be interested in more :)

Chapter 1

In theory, having soulmates was an amazing thing; a gift from the universe itself that promised love and happiness for everyone.

Dream wished the universe left a receipt so he could send the stupid “gift” back.

As a kid, he remembered the way everyone talked about how incredible having a soulmate was. It was supposed to be poetic or something, the way you shared in your soulmate’s pain, knowing from a young age what they would think the first time they saw you. Other kids would show off the marks on their arms, words that said “cool,” or “pretty,” or “funny.” Harmless thoughts, harmless first encounters promising a life time together with their one true love.

Dream didn’t have to pull up the sleeves of his hoodie to remember the word burned into his wrist, or the years of embarrassment it had given him.

“Creepy.”

His parents had said there was a mistake. After all, as a kid, Dream seemed to charm everyone he met with his boundless confident and friendly spirit. No one could think such a charismatic person was creepy. It didn’t make sense. Maybe the mark would change or disappear. Maybe it had been misread.

After all, what kind of person would be so quickly rejected by their soulmate?

When Dream was still young, it wasn’t really an issue. But the older he got, and the longer the

mark stayed unchanged, the more people cared. The more people judged him, or worse, pitied him. It was hard to be the charming friendly kid when everyone assumed you were unlovable.

So yeah, Dream was pretty disillusioned with the whole “soulmate” bullshit.

Staring into his mug, he knocked back a swig of coffee, feeling a flicker of petty spite that his dick of a soulmate would have to suffer a burnt tongue too. Sure, it was a dumb little revenge on someone he didn't even know, but it made Dream feel a little bit better.

Drinking the rest of the bitter coffee, Dream glanced out the window, and grabbed the bag that held his inventory. It was early in the morning, still not long after sunrise. Although he wasn't the sort of person who enjoyed waking up early, Dream didn't mind it either, and he would need plenty of time for the journey ahead of him. He rifled through the pack, checking to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Food for the trip, a sleeping bag, his compass; the only things missing were his shield and his axe, too big to fit in the bag. He swung it over his shoulders, standing up from the table.

Dream grabbed his sword from the table, sliding it into the sheathe on his belt, and hung his shield on the back of his bag. It would be a little inconvenient if he needed it in a hurry, but he figured he wouldn't run into too much trouble before nightfall anyway. Picking up his house key from the windowsill, Dream headed to the front door of his house.

He paused, hand on the doorknob, frozen for a moment. After a few heartbeats, he stepped back. Dream turned to face a hook on the wall next to him, from which hung a simple white mask. It was completely smooth, only marked by a lopsided black smile, with two dot eyes made from black mesh. It was worn from use, more than Dream liked to admit to himself. He carefully took the mask down from the hook, staring at it uncertainly.

As hard as he tried to convince himself that he didn't care what anyone thought, not even his so-called “soulmate,” that wasn't entirely true.

It was easier to wear a mask. No one can judge you if they don't know who you are. At least, that was the comfort it had given Dream. Admittedly, he wore it more often than he should. He'd never say so if asked, but he was fairly certain it had been years since he'd gone out in public without the anonymity of his mask. Although Dream briefly considered today being the day he broke that streak, his hands acted without asking, sliding the familiar mask on out of habit.

That was good enough. Feeling safe enough now to go outside, Dream stepped out through the door and locked it behind him. As his feet hit the dirt road, his heart started to beat faster in his chest.

Dream pulled out his phone, unsurprised to see that there were no new messages so early in the morning. He opened the group chat, eyes flickering over previous messages fondly. It would be his first time meeting his friends in person, other than Sapnap. All any of them had talked about the last week was their plans to meet up. If Dream hadn't already been excited, the infectious enthusiasm would have changed that. Sapnap had been rambling about everything they'd do when they all finally met up, while Bad had practically spammed the channel with smiley faces and heart emojis.

Dream scrolled up till he reached the last message George had sent last night. Behind the mask, he smiled. He'd reread the short message several times already. Each time the words made his heart warm. "Can't wait to see you Dream."

Sure, he was excited to meet everyone. But he'd lived next to Sapnap as kids, and he'd only known Bad for a few months. George was one of his oldest and closest friends, and now for the first time, they'd be meeting face to face. Of /course/ he was excited. He'd been waiting years to finally meet George, and soon, it would be really happening.

Dream almost dropped his phone, cursing as a sudden pain cut into his palm. It wasn't particularly deep pain, but it had caught him by surprise, like someone had snuck up and pricked him with a needle. Of course, there was no mark on his skin. The pain wasn't coming from himself. This was something that happened every few days, actually. Just another thing his soulmate used to make Dream miserable.

He gritted his teeth as the pricking continued. It was rhythmic; four quick pokes, a pause, another quick poke followed by a pause, poke scrape poke poke, poke scrape poke poke, and three more scrapes. It was almost like a rhythm on his skin, and maybe it would be cute if it didn't hurt. Dream wondered if it meant his soulmate was a masochist, or if the pain really was a sadistic gift just for him. Neither thought was particularly endearing. Dream slapped the back of his hand hard enough it stung, a firm warning to his soulmate to knock it off.

The poking and scraping cut off after that, at least. Sometimes the random patterns of scratching his hand went on for way too long.

Dream set off down the dirt road, rubbing the skin of his palm as the mild pain began already to fade. He'd never done anything to intentionally send his soulmate harm, but if he bruised himself while jumping through the trees or burnt his mouth on a coffee, he couldn't help feeling a bit of petty satisfaction. Why bother being extra careful when his soulmate was already destined to hate him?

Although the village had been quiet so early in the morning, passing the last building and stepping into the fields beyond felt like escaping a jail cell. The air was fresh and clean, sharp with the flavor of the wildlife that breathed it. The trees seemed to lean towards Dream, their branches outstretched in a welcoming embrace. Whether it was because of a natural preference or the social isolation he'd long since grown into, Dream overwhelmingly preferred the chaotic wilds to life in a village. No weird looks, no pitying glances from the people who knew of his situation, only a game of survival that pitted him against the natural world.

Dream checked his phone, pulling up the coordinates to the town where Sapnap lived. He probably would arrive a few hours after sunset if he made good pace. Dream lived the closest, but Bad liked to ride horseback, so it would probably take them about the same time to make the trip. It was furthest for George by far, a journey of more than a week. Still, they'd already planned everything out so they'd all arrive within a day or two of one another.

It was a surprisingly (almost disappointingly) peaceful walk, with few mountains or ravines to

hamper Dream's progress. Although he'd prefer excitement over leisure any day, he could still admit the gentle sun and distant birdsong was relaxing. He didn't let it slow his pace. He could take a lazy day once he was finally with all his friends.

The morning passed without incident, the sun slowly tracing a path from the horizon to its peak in the sky above. Dream had started eating while he walked, too impatient to waste time having a laid-back lunch. As he ripped into the steak he packed for the trip, his phone let out a short cheerful buzz. Dream quickly pulled it out of his pocket, grinning at the notification from the group chat.

George: I was the farthest away and I beat you all here? Oooh, you guys are slow

Badboyhalo: You left first Georgie, its not a race!

Sapnap: Oh yeah? Last person to town is a stale muffin

Badboyhalo: Hey! Well... sorry Dreamy, but you're going down! ^u^

Chuckling, Dream shoved the last of his lunch in his mouth, hopping into the conversation with the.

Dream: You're lucky you have a horse, or you'd never be able to keep up with me

Badboyhalo: >:0

Badboyhalo: Just because its true doesn't mean it isnt rude!

Dream: All I'm saying is that there's no way I'm losing, sorry Bad. You better get used to being a stale muffin, because you're not gonna win

Badboyhalo: Nooooooo

George: Go Bad go! Ride fast!

Sapnap: Lol shut up Dream you're not the only person who knows how to sprint

Dream: Oooh, strong words from the guy who never beat me in manhunt

Sapnap: Because you cheated, duh!

George: What's manhunt?

Sapnap: Its this game Dream came up with forever ago, we played it all the time when we lived close by

Dream: And you never ever won

Sapnap: Look I was a great hunter, I'm just shit at hiding, alright?

Badboyhalo: Language!

Sapnap: It was just shit, cmon Bad

Badboyhalo: Language again!! >:P

George: Hunter? So what, it's like, hide and seek?

Dream: Haha yeah but with more camping and murder, its great—we should play!

George: Of course its a murder game. I'm not even surprised. Why are you like this Dreeeaaaam

Sapnap: How are we gonna play with more than two people?

Dream: That's easy, three hunters and one runner

Sapnap: Easy sounds right, lol, you're gonna go down in like ten seconds

George: Can we at least hold off plotting each others murder till we're in the same place?

Badboyhalo: That's right! I still have a race to win

Dream: Good luck Bad, you'll need it

Badboyhalo: I won't need it, but I'll accept it anyway, giving me the advantage

George: You guys are so dumb. Just hurry up and get here!

Dream smiled, running his thumb fondly along the side of the phone, a gesture of affection he couldn't quite share with the people it was meant for.

Dream: Ooooh so excited to meet me Gogy? Might wanna calm down before people get the wrong idea~

George: There's no way you're this annoying in real life, right?

Dream: Is that a challenge?

George: I swear to god, Dream

Dream's smile grew wider, a small wheezing laugh escaping him. He tucked the phone back into his hoodie pocket, his pace picking up, his excitement for the day renewed. He hummed a tuneless note to himself as he hopped from a fallen log to a moss-coated stone. It took all his self control not to break out in a run, knowing if he burnt all his energy now he wouldn't make it to Sapnap's place before night. It was frustrating to know the long awaited meeting was so close, but still a long time away.

He'd never really told Bad or George about... well, almost anything in his personal life. Sapnap knew, but if Dream was being honest, it was mostly because they'd grown up together. Telling others about his worries, his concerns, his need for anonymity to feel safe; it wasn't really something Dream felt comfortable with. He knew his friends were all good people. They wouldn't judge him for the mark on his wrist, for the fact that his soulmate apparently would hate him from the day they met.

But there was still the chance his friends might pity him, and to Dream, that idea felt much, much worse.

The others had mentioned their soulmate bonds before, though it didn't come up much. Bad's mark said "adorable," which was definitely accurate—even without knowing what he looked like, everyone could agree Bad had an undeniably cute demeanor. Sapnap's mark said "funny," and while Dream liked to tease that it meant funny-looking, there was no doubt it meant his soulmate would find him entertaining.

Dream couldn't remember exactly what George's mark said. Other than Dream, he was the one to bring it up the least, always getting flustered when the topic of conversation came to love. It was something like, "pretty" or "beautiful," and the thought annoyed Dream. It was so... generic. So bland. He knew people didn't choose their first feelings when they met someone new, and an appreciation on George's looks was hardly an insult, but Dream couldn't help feeling offended on behalf of his friend. There were plenty of striking things about George. He was witty, and sweet, and so very obnoxious, but in the most charming way. He was thoughtful and mischievous and wonderful. The idea that anyone could see George and not see any of that instantly annoyed Dream.

in a way he couldn't quite put into words.

He shook off the thought, hunching his shoulders and hiking up his backpack. It was an annoyance he'd have to keep to himself. Dream knew how seriously some people took the whole soulmate bullshit, and he didn't want to upset George by saying whatever stranger he was destined to end up with was probably a shallow asshole.

As the path grew thick with densely clustered forest, Dream unhooked the axe from his belt, absentmindedly slashing the heavy foliage in his path. Climbing through the undergrowth brought back the idea that they all play manhunt together, and the possibility made him smile.

Dream hadn't played manhunt since Sarnap moved away. Most people hated dying, only trusting respawns as a last resort, so there hadn't been anyone else interested in playing a potentially lethal game. Still, what did death matter if it was temporary? Sure it hurt, but no game was good without high stakes. Besides, nothing had ever matched that adrenaline fueled thrill of running through the forest, death seconds behind him, the risk of a misstep being the only thing between him and a harsh respawn.

Dream had been a bit of a weird teen.

Even though he hadn't played manhunt in a long time, Dream liked to think he'd still be able to hold his own. He still went out on expeditions, making money by trading the loot he'd gotten from dungeons, so he was definitely still fit and fighting. He wondered if Bad and George would really be up for playing such an intense game. On Bad's part, he couldn't say for sure. But without a doubt, George wouldn't back down from a challenge. Hell, he was almost as competitive as Dream.

Eventually, the sun and the horizon began to bleed into one another in the west. Dream's legs were tired, but not sore, the muscles well accustomed to being put through more physical strain than most.

It couldn't be far now; the forest began to thin as the thick oaks became speckled with the occasional tall scrawny birch tree. Dream had come out here to see Sapnap a few times before, and he knew the shift of plantlife meant he was getting close. He slipped his phone out of his pocket, typing in a quick message.

Dream: Almost there

Badboyhalo: Wait, nooooo, go slower, I'm not there yet!

Dream crested the top of a hill, glancing down the other side. Only a short ways away, where the trees eventually dispersed, he could make out the shadowed silhouettes of a few small scattered houses. Their windows began to light up as the sun continued its slow dive into the earth, preparing for the monsters that would appear as night fell. It was smaller than the village where Dream lived, and Sapnap's house was a fair distance from the others, and for that Dream felt grateful. It'd be nice to just be with his friends, to not have to worry about the staring eyes of strangers. He looked around, trying to remember where Sapnap's house was.

There— in the clearing behind the small house with the crooked chimney. He could see a figure standing out alone in the darkness, standing not far from the treeline and looking down at his phone. That was Sapnap's house, so that must be Sapnap.

Dream opened his mouth to yell and make his presence known, but paused before any words left him. A mischievous grin curled across his face. He began to approach, but made no effort to call out. He moved across the forest floor silently, carefully choosing each step to avoid breaking any fallen twigs or snapping any branches.

Dream kept low in the undergrowth, keeping his head down as he skulked closer. He kept quiet until he was just up the hill from Sapnap. He was close enough now that distance did little to hide him, and only the bushes and low-hanging branches kept his presence hidden,

He could get a better look at Sapnap now. His back was turned on the trees, and he was looking down at his phone with an irritated frown, typing something out. He was obviously unaware someone was so nearby. It was almost too easy.

Biting back a laugh, Dream slipped his axe back into his belt, standing up slowly so he wouldn't rustle the leaves loudly enough to draw attention. He slipped out past the tree line, bending his legs. He pushed off the turf, his light steps almost silent as he sprinted down the hill, grinning like a man possessed.

"Oh Saaaaapnaaaap~!" he yelled tauntingly. Sapnap glanced over his shoulder, cursing loudly before taking off running the other direction. Dream cackled, running harder, not about to let his friend get away so easily. "C'mere Sapnap, I just wanna taaaaaalk!"

"Hey, cut it out!" Sapnap shouted, too short on breath to laugh back. "Stop!"

Rather than do as he's told (something Dream didn't particularly like to do anyway), Dream kept running, Sapnap only inches out of reach. He lunged, wrapping his arms around Sapnap and tackling him to the ground, pinning him in the dirt. He couldn't help laughing, a loud wheezing cackle at how easy it had been to ambush his old friend.

"Let me up!" Sapnap complained, wriggling under Dream as if he could worm loose easily. Dream just laughed harder, laughing so hard tears started welling up in his eyes, his chest shaking with each amused wheeze.

He stopped laughing when a rock sailed past his head, having only barely missed bludgeoning him in the back of the skull. "Get off of him!" Someone shouted, their voice coming from the same direction as the thrown rock. "Sapnap, are you okay?"

“I’m fine!” Sapnap yelled, managing to at least lift his face out of the dirt. “It’s okay George, it’s just Dream!”

Dream got off of Sapnap quickly, brushing dirt from his hoodie as he stoop up, turning around. There was a second person, standing just past the porch, where he would have been out of sight from Dream’s view on the hill. He was eyeing Dream with suspicion, a second rock held in his right hand.

Dream’s heart stuttered in his chest. *This* was George? Sapnap had to be confused, or mistaken or... Dream swallowed, uncertain how to react to seeing the face of his best friend for the very first time.

George’s features were soft, the light of the setting sun casting his skin in a gentle glow. His dark brown hair shimmered like gold in the lowlight. He had a small scattering of freckles across his nose, fewer and fainter than Dream’s, like little kisses of starlight. His lips were set in a cute pout, shifting from distrust to fond annoyance. George shook his head as he dropped the second rock, a small musical laugh parting his lips. “I should have guessed,” he said, the worry in his eyes vanishing, replaced by a glimmer of amusement. “You really *are* this annoying in person, aren’t you?”

Rushing to gather his thoughts after being caught so severely off-guard, Dream laughed sheepishly, glad the mask could hide how bright red his cheeks were burning. “Hi Gogy! Happy to see me?” he said.

“You’re the worst,” Sapnap grumbled, getting up from the ground, trying to wipe the smear of dirt off his plain white tee. “You know that right?”

“That’s why he does it, duh,” George said with a grin. “He likes the attention, Sapnap, obviously. Just ignore him. It works for me.”

Dream let out an exaggerated gasp of offense, pressing a hand to his chest, but he doesn't say anything. He wants to join in the banter like usual, but he's still getting his footing, trying to wrap his head around the way his heart burst at the sight of George.

Sapnap punched Dream lightly in the shoulder, pulling a face. "Yeah, let me just ignore the six-foot tall madman tackling me like to the ground," he said, snorting.

George laughed again, more relaxed, more warm. Dream found himself suddenly hating that they'd lived so far apart, wondering how many times George had laughed at something Dream had said, too far away for Dream to bask in sound of that cute laugh. "That's fair. You certainly know how to make an entrance Dream," George said, grinning. "I'd apologize for throwing a rock at you, but you're the one who was screaming like a masked psychopath."

Dream's heart seemed to fall down a flight of stairs. He sheepishly reached up, adjusting the strap of the mask, glad it made breaking eye contact so easy. "Oh, uh, the mask isn't part of... I wear this all the time," he said, the words coming out as awkward as the did anytime someone asked. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to him that anyone would bring it up. Sapnap already knew, and Dream had known the others long enough it was easy to forget they didn't know he wore a mask. Would they think he was weird? Stupid? God, he should have mentioned it before coming to meet them in person. He tried to think of a way to explain why he wore a mask without getting too personal, but luckily, Sapnap stepped in to save the day.

"He wears it everywhere because he's so ugly," Sapnap said, elbowing Dream. "He'd take it off, but you'd get one good look and die of disgust. It's like roadkill under there."

Dream wheezed, elbowing Sapnap back harder. "If you're trying to tell George we're twins, there's easier ways to do it," he teased.

Sapnap sputtered in mock protest, scowling and crossing his arms like a petulant child. But he couldn't hide his smile, and George didn't hold back his laughter. Dream felt his heartbeat finally

begin to steady, warmth washing over him. He stole another glance at George, at the way his face light up as he laughed, and his steady heartbeat seemed to stumble again.

Dream decided he was just excited to see his friend for the first time. He'd probably feel this way when he saw Bad too, right? It was normal. The only reason Sapnap hadn't sparked such an intense reaction was because they already met. But if it was just George? That wouldn't make sense. He shook off the thought as Sapnap started talking about guest rooms and dinner, and whether or not Bad would make it that night or some time tomorrow. Dream tried to focus, tried to keep his mind off the way his head was spinning.

He was here with George, face-to-face with his best friend, actually seeing what George looked like behind the screen. He was with two of his closest friends, a third one on the way, and he didn't have anything to worry about while the four of them were together. Of course he was happy. That was all there was to it.

But looking at George, Dream didn't feel happy. He felt excited, and confused, and impatient, and maybe even a little sad. Most of the strange cocktail of feelings didn't even make sense. Maybe the rock had hit Dream in the head after all, and this was what it felt like to be concussed. He forced the feelings down, focusing just on how happy he was to be here, refusing to acknowledge the more complicated emotions he didn't understand.

Maybe, when Bad got there, he'd feel the same way. He could tell them about it, and they could laugh about how that's just what meeting friends feels like. Maybe when Bad got there, it would make Dream's feelings about George make a little more sense.

Or maybe Dream was already in big trouble.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Badboyhalo arrives. Dream and Sapnap have a talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Badboyhalo: Ok I got held up by mobs last night and I KNOW that means Dream beat me

Badboyhalo: But even if I'm last, I'm not a stale muffin!!

Badboyhalo: And I brought breakfast donuts to prove it :)

Sapnap: Bad, you are literally my favorite person right now.

Dream followed Sapnap to the front of the house, fighting back a yawn. George was still asleep, no doubt exhausted from having made the longest trip. Dream tucked his hands into the pockets of his hoodie, staying back so Sapnap could open the door.

An unfamiliar face stood on the doormat, grinning brightly and clutching a white box and a carton of chocolate milk. He wore black and red, but the edgy colors contrasted sharply with his cheery dimpled smile. Considering that he had the same enthusiasm as an overly friendly puppy, there was no doubt that this was Badboyhalo.

He rushed in the moment the door was open, trying awkwardly to pull Sapnap and Dream into a hug, despite both his hands being full. "You guyyys!" He squealed. "I can't believe we're all actually here!"

Sapnap laughed, taking the box out of Bad's hands, moving to try and make room for him to pass in the cramped hall. "Hey Bad, good of you to finally show up!" He said, freeing one hand to ruffle Bad's hair affectionately.

Bad grinned, giggling warmly. "This is amazing! So, who's who?" He paused, a hopeful look crossing his face. "Are you guys George and Sapnap? Did I beat Dream here after all?"

Dream stepped forward, picking Bad up off the floor and pulling him into a hug. "Hah, in your dreams!" He said, laughing.

"The tall freak is Dream," Sapnap said, biting back a laugh as he shook his head. "I'm Sapnap. George is still sleeping like a rock, but he's here too."

Dream's paused at the mention of George, a startling thought crossing his mind. Seeing Bad had been /nothing/ like seeing George. He was excited to meet his friend, sure, but it was different. There wasn't any confusion, no reeling at the sight of him, no overwhelming urge to memorize every feature of Bad's face. Bad's giggles didn't make Dream feel as though he'd wasted years living so far from the sound. He was happy to see Bad, elated, really. And that was it. No weird stinging, no blend of conflicting emotions, no confusion. Why was it different with George?

Maybe he didn't want to know the answer.

"Dreaaaam!" Bad was squealing. "Put me down you... you... tall man!"

Snapped back to the moment, Dream laughed, dropping Bad an inch or so back onto his feet. Bad wasn't necessarily short; it was more that Dream was really quite tall, so holding his friend aloft hadn't been much of a challenge. He wondered, how long could he carry someone as short as George? "It's good to actually meet you," Dream tells Bad, smiling.

"I know it is," Bad said brightly, heading into the house to look for the kitchen. "I'm a delight!"

Although the kitchen was small, it could serve the four men well enough. Bad set the carton of chocolate milk on the table, then took back the white box from Sapnap and set it down, opening

the lid. “I didn’t know if the bakery in this town is good, but I wanted this to be a surprise so I didn’t ask,” Bad told Sapnap apologetically.

Sapnap chuckled, heading over to the stove to start a pot of coffee. “I mean, I’m not turning down donuts no matter where you got them,” he said. His head disappeared into a cupboard, only returning when he’d found four chipped but mostly in-tact cups.

“We should wait for Georgie to wake up before we eat!” Bad said. “It’s going to be our first breakfast together, it should be special!”

Sapnap groaned, rolling his eyes. “It’ll probably be, like, a million years before he wakes up, and I’m hungry now!”

“It would be rude to eat without him!” Bad insisted.

Dream grinned, then pounded his fist against the wooden wall, the sound reverberating through the small house. “George!” He yelled. “Wake the fuck up already, Bad’s here!”

Bad crossed his arms and scowled, though the expression wasn’t particularly threatening coming from him. “Dream! That’s bad language and bad manners!” He scolded, shaking his head like a disappointed parent.

Still, it did the trick—a nearby door cracked open, and George poked his head out. His hair was a mess, and a blanket still hung from his shoulders like a cape. He brushed the hair out of his eyes, soft with the sleepiness that still clung to him. The sight made Dream’s heart stumble again, though he still couldn’t say why. “I’m going to kill you,” George muttered, barely getting out the words before being overtaken by a quiet yawn.

Dream just grinned, pretending that the sight of George first thing in the morning didn’t make him much happier than it had any right too. “C’mon Gogy, Bad’s here,” he cooed, propping his chin up his hand as he met George’s sleepy, irritated glare.

Bad scooted over, to make room for George, sliding across a cup of chocolate milk with an apologetic smile. “So! We were planning to hang out for about two weeks, right?” He said, grabbing one of the donuts he’d brought, munching on it enthusiastically.

“That’s the plan, but you guys can stay as long as you want,” Sapnap said, checking the steaming pot of coffee impatiently. “This place is way too boring.”

“No way it’s as boring as where we used to live,” Dream said, laughing. “When the most fun a guy can have is getting his head chopped off, you know you’ve hit the bottom of a barrel.”

Bad shook his head in disbelief, his expression somewhere between amused and deeply concerned. “You guys actually used to kill each other as a game?”

Sapnap shrugged. “Don’t look at me, it was Dream’s idea,” he said, walking back to the table with the coffee pot, pouring himself a cup.

“It’s not that big of a deal!” Dream said, waving off Bad’s concern. “And manhunt has like, rules and win conditions and stuff, like any other game. Honestly, I don’t get the big deal. What’s so bad about dying if we respawn anyway?”

George yawned, taking a slow sip from his cup. “Fuckin’ hurts,” he pointed out. At Bad’s pointed stare, he mumbled a sleepy half-assed correction. “Uh... muffin hurts.”

“And there’s that old superstition!” Bad said, eyes going wide. “Every time you respawn, it’ll be another year longer til you meet your soulmate! Not to mention it hurts them too. But really, I can’t imagine if I had to wait another year before—” he fell suddenly silent, his cheeks darkening with a blush as he coughed awkwardly into his napkin.

Sapnap leaned over, lightly punching Bad on the arm. “Dude!” He said, grinning. “Don’t tell me! You met your soulmate and haven’t told us?”

Bad became obviously flustered, laughing sheepishly as his blush deepened. “No! Well, yes? I mean, we only figured it out a few weeks ago, and I wanted it to be a surprise when I told you!”

George, seemingly stirred from his sleepy stupor, put an arm around Bad and smiled. “Aww, Bad’s found his one true love!” He said, giggling affectionately. “Come on, you’ve got to tell us everything! How’d you find out?”

Dream focused on his cup of coffee, ignoring the way his insides writhed. He wanted to be happy for Bad. He really, truly wanted to be excited as everyone else, to congratulate him on finding love.

But the words felt heavy in his throat, like lead on his tongue.

What if Bad got too busy spending time with his soulmate to be with them? What if Bad's soulmate was controlling or jealous and wouldn't let him hang out? Bad was only the first one. How long before Sapnap found his soulmate, and decided Dream was boring in comparison?

And George. Eventually, George would find his soulmate. The stupid soulmate who would see George's pretty face before his warm laugh, his playful banter, his clever mind. Best friends were nice and all, but what did that mean when compared with a soulmate? How could George and Dream's bond ever compare to one ordained by fate itself? He could never be as important to George as someone who he was destined to love.

And once they'd all found love, Dream would have nobody.

He did try to feel happy for Bad. He really did. But all he could do was sit up straight and pretend to be excited as he listened to Bad describing how exactly he'd found his soulmate.

Eventually the conversation wound down to a comfortable silence, though now and then George would ask Bad questions about what it was like, and "how he'd known." As he often was, Dream felt grateful for the mask, glad he didn't have to fake the emotions he couldn't find. It wasn't fair for him to be so cynical and selfish when Bad was so clearly elated. But he couldn't help it, feeling a twinge of frustration every time George had a new question.

Whether he'd noticed Dream's silence on the topic, or just had something else on his mind, eventually Sapnap brought up a much more welcome topic. "So!" He said, leaning on the table as he set down his now emptied coffee cup. "We've got at least two weeks, how do we spend them?"

"I'm happy to do anything with you guys!" Bad said. "So long as we're together, I'll have fun."

George spoke up, having finally come to full wakefulness. "What about that game Dream was talking about?" He suggested.

Dream stood up, slamming his hands against the table so hard the mugs rattled. "Yes!" He yelled "It's called manhunt. When Sap and I played, it was one hunter against one runner. The runner has to reach the End dimension without dying once. It's the hunter's job to stop and kill the runner at any cost, and they can come back no matter how many times they die!" He grinned, unable to contain his enthusiasm. "It's a challenge of skills, smarts, and luck. It's camping, mountaineering,

dungeon crawling, and combat all rolled into one. Back when it was just me and Sapnap we played one-on-one, but three hunters and one runner would be way more exciting!”

Bad frowned, raising his hand slightly. “I’m not saying no, but wouldn’t it be more fair to have two runners and two hunters?”

Dream cackled, shooting Sapnap a mischievous smile. “What do you think, Sap, does that sound more fair?”

“No way,” Sap said quickly, shaking his head. “Dream does /not/ get back up, that’d be a nightmare. Trust me, Bad, he’ll be fine on his own.”

George smiled at Dream, and he felt his traitorous heart tripping over itself yet again. “Sounds exciting! We’re gonna kick your muffin Dream,” he said, and Bad nodded in approval.

Dream was honestly ready to take off running and start the game of manhunt then and there. His friends seemed to be able to tell, because Sapnap stood up and started speaking before Dream could sprint out the door. “If we’re playing manhunt, we’ll start tomorrow,” Sapnap said quickly, shooting Dream a look. “You all barely got here, you need time to rest. Besides, I need to go shopping. I didn’t have as many guest blankets as I thought,” he added.

“I’ll come with,” Dream volunteered. The false-start to a game of manhunt had already gotten adrenaline rushing through his body, and he couldn’t burn off the energy just sitting in Sapnap’s house. Besides, he wanted to catch up with his friend. Hell, maybe even Sapnap could help him figure out what was going on with his weird feelings over George.

Sapnap agreed, and once they had all finished up breakfast, Dream sat down on Sapnap’s couch to get ready. Once he’d checked that his emeralds were still in his pack in case he needed to buy something, he started lacing up his boots. They were more meant for hiking than a casual stroll about a village, but he liked the support the boots gave him when he was running and jumping. (That, and the thick soles made him even taller. He liked being so much taller than everyone else.)

Someone flops onto the couch next to Dream, and he can’t help smiling when he hears George’s voice. “Hey Dream,” his friend said, a playful lilt in his voice that made something in Dream’s chest flutter.

“Hey Georgie,” he shot back, matching the light joking tone. Dream knew he could ask George

what it meant, the way his heart seemed to act up every time they were close. But the idea of asking George directly made Dream feel... well, it made him feel all too many things and left him confused all over again.

George leaned closer, smiling, and Dream couldn't help but notice that George's smile is even cuter than his pout. "Manhunt sounds absolutely insane," he says. "Like, in the best possible way. It's really cool that you came up with that Dream." His smile turned mischievous. "It's going to be sooo fun killing you."

Dream let out a wheeze, shoving George away playfully, though he found himself suddenly missing the brief closeness. "God, you're a grade A freak Gogy. It's gonna be fun to see you try."

George laughed, and he gave Dream a fond smile that felt both so gentle and so very much like being struck by a lightning bolt all at once. "Don't stay out shopping too long," he said. "I didn't come all the way out here not to spend time with you, y'know? We were both so tired last night that we didn't talk much and... I just want to take advantage of our time here together, you know?"

"Yeah," Dream said, glad his laughter sounds like wheezing so he wouldn't have to explain why he suddenly can't catch his breath.

When Sapnap came to grab Dream, he couldn't help but be grateful for an excuse to escape. It wasn't that he didn't want to be with George. It's just that he suddenly had no idea how to act around his best friend.

Sapnap was talking; about how good it was that Bad made it, about how loud Dream and George both snore, about how exciting it would be to play manhunt again. Dream just followed behind, now and then tossing in a nod or a few words of agreement. Sapnap probably noticed something was off, but to his credit, he didn't rush Dream to talk before he was ready.

While Sapnap bought the extra blankets they'd come for, Dream stared at the sky through the mesh eyes of his mask, thinking through how to phrase his thoughts. He knew Sapnap would do what he could to help—as much as they made fun of each other, Sapnap was loyal to a fault, and Dream could trust him for advice. But surprisingly, he still felt awkward trying to choose the right words.

Still, by the time Sapnap came back out of the shop with an armload of folded blankets, Dream had managed to somewhat prepare himself. "Hey Sap?" He said, tucking his hands in his hoodie pockets, trying to seem casual.

Sapnap tilted his head to the side, looking at Dream curiously. “Yeah? What’s up man?”

Dream swallowed, steeling his nerves. Why was he so anxious anyway? He was just asking for advice, trying to get some help with strange feelings, to straighten things out so they all made sense again. “It’s not a huge deal, but I’ve been thinking about—ow, fuck!” He hissed, flinching back.

Dream whipped his right hand out of his pocket, scowling at his soulmate’s awful timing. The needle jabs were more insistent today. Scrape poke poke scrape, scrape scrape scrape, then the same pattern again. Dream cursed under his breath, rubbing his palm like the pain was a soreness he could make go away.

“Is it your soulmate again?” Sapnap said, putting a hand on Dream’s shoulder. As much as Dream hated telling people about his soulmate, Sapnap already knew about the mark on Dream’s wrist and the way his soulmate seemed to poke and scratch in the most irritating ways. “I’m really sorry man. And after Bad’s thing this morning—I’m sorry, that must suck,” Sapnap was saying. But the words didn’t stick.

Dream sat down on a rock near the dirt path that cued through the village, staring down at his hand as if it were to blame. “I hope I never meet them,” he muttered.

“Maybe it’s a misunderstanding,” Sapnap suggests, even though it was an argument he’d lost before. “Maybe your soulmate is clumsy. It’s possible they just sew a lot or something?”

“And they think I’m a creep,” Dream reminded Sapnap. “Or they will when they meet me. Because that’s what this whole soulmate thing is, right? Fate or destiny or whatever is decided the perfect person for me is someone who hates me. Who cares how I feel about it? If I care about someone, it doesn’t mean shit if we don’t share our pain, or if I don’t think about them the way their wrist says I should.” He picked up a small piece of stone from the grass, hurling it into a shrub near the road as if the small act of aimless violence would make him feel better.

It didn’t.

Sapnap sat down next to him, pressing his shoulder against Dream, an invitation to lean in. Embarrassed as he was, Dream took the invitation, leaning on Sapnap for support. They sat in silence for a moment, and even though Sapnap couldn’t understand, he could at least hold Dream up.

Eventually, Sapnap broke the silence. He navigated his words carefully. “Dream?” He said gently. When he didn’t get a response, he spoke again. “Dream. You like him, don’t you?”

Dream didn’t have to ask who he meant. But he didn’t want to say it. Because if he admitted how long he’d been hanging off every word, how badly he’d wanted to meet, how much his heart fought in his chest at the thought; that would make it real. If he spoke his feelings, if he let them be true, it would make him fragile. Saying it out loud would only make it hurt so much more when it all broke.

If his feelings about George really were what Dream thought they might be... well, he was well and truly fucked, right?

“You should tell him,” Sapnap said, and it was obvious even Dream’s silence had been proof enough. Was he really that transparent?

Dream laughed. A bitter, clipped laugh that held no warmth. “Are you kidding? You saw how closely he listened to Bad. You’ve seen how flustered he gets whenever people talk about love! George can’t wait to meet his soulmate. He can’t wait for some stranger to come and steal him away.” Dream balled his hands into fists, and in spite of himself, his grip began to tighten, his knuckles going white. “What’s he going to do? The best chance I could hope for is to just be a placeholder until his soulmate shows up. You can’t just expect someone to owe you love! Especially not when even your ‘perfect match’ can’t stand you.” The words started spilling out, and Dream’s heart lurched when he realized just how long he’d been holding this in.

Despite all the walls he had put up, despite everything he’d done to protect himself from being hurt, despite only wanting to stay safe; the crack in his armor was already there. How long had he felt this way without admitting it to himself? Days? Weeks? Months? How many times had he told himself the idea of George’s soulmate bothered him out of protectiveness, when deep down, it had always been jealousy?

“Dream,” Sapnap said softly, but his voice didn’t hold any answers, only a gentle desperation to offer comfort out of both of their reach. “Dream, it’s okay,” he said, though he didn’t sound certain of it himself.

Dream shook his head, glad for the mask, glad Sapnap didn’t see how close he’d come to crying. “It’s stupid,” he said, his voice cracking. “It’s stupid. But I’ll get over it. George wants a soulmate, and I’d be a shitty friend if I let my feelings fuck that up for him.” Before Sapnap could argue or offer more hollow words of comfort, Dream stood up, pretending to brush dust off the sleeves of his hoodie if only to have something to do. “Come on, we still need to buy some food for lunch and dinner, and if we’re out too long Bad’s gonna worry.”

“Dream,” Sapnap said, standing up and grabbing Dream’s sleeve, trying to make eye contact through the mask. “It’s okay to be upset. We can talk—“

“It’s fine,” Dream said, his tone slicing through the tense air. He lifted his right hand, pulling down his sleeve just enough so Sapnap could see the damned word Dream went to such efforts to hide. “I’m used to people not liking me back, remember?”

Sapnap sighed, his brow drawing together, his expression flickering between anger and sadness. “You need to let yourself be happy, Dream,” he said, his voice quiet but firm.

Dream looked away, tucking his sleeve back over his wrist, back over the mark meant to connect him to his love. “Telling George how I feel won’t make me happy,” he said bitterly. Even if it would, he barely understood his feelings, having fought so long to avoid coming to terms with them. “He has a soulmate. Someone he’s going to love. At the very best I’d be setting myself up for heartbreak, and at the worst I’d be dragging him down with me.”

“So you’ll just be miserable?” Sapnap asked.

“I’ll get over it,” Dream repeated, and he wondered if he could convince himself of that, if he said it enough. Still, being in denial had been easier. It had been easy to convince himself he only loved the playful flirty banter for the joke of it. But then, there had always been distance to protect him from the man he was so fond of. Before, Dream could convince himself he was imagining his own feelings.

Maybe “getting over” George wasn’t even possible. But Dream was going to damn well try.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for the wonderful support on the last chapter. i was really nervous to post any works for this fandom, and i cant put into words how happy you all have made me. hope this chapter lived up to the first :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

George practices archery for the upcoming game of manhunt. Dream helps.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It seemed hardly fair that Dream was trying to do the right thing and get over his feelings for George, but had to do it while staying in the same place as him, listening to his cute laugh, seeing his warm smile. How was he meant to survive being face to face with George for two weeks?

Of course, when Dream and Sapnap got back from shopping, that meant facing George; a far more intimidating task now that Dream had admitted his feelings. He followed Sapnap inside, tightening his grip on the armload of groceries, and pretending the sound of George's voice in the living room didn't make his pulse pick up.

“—not because they're ignoring me?”

“Georgie, you're a wonderful friend, but you're also an absolute muffin,” chimed in Bad's familiar voice. As Sapnap and Dream came in, he turned around to wave at them from over the couch.

“Sap, Dreamy! Welcome back! Need any help putting things away?”

Sapnap glanced from the men on the couch to Dream, then shook his head. “Nah, we got it all. Thanks though.”

George gave Sapnap and Dream a quick smile (why did his smile have to be so damn cute, why did this have to be so hard) before turning back to Bad, shoving him lightly. “What do you mean I'm a muffin, I thought it was pretty clever!”

Sapnap took the groceries from Dream's arms, sorting them into the various kitchen cabinets. Catching the distracted look in Dream's eye, Sapnap nudged him, pointing back. “Go grab some firewood,” he said, and Dream felt grateful for the excuse to get outside and get his mind out of the hole he'd dug for himself.

Dream headed right for the backdoor, only catching the last of the argument in the living room, (“George, you can’t just assume someone memorized--”) before he was back outdoors.

Although picking up dead branches was hardly exciting, it kept Dream’s hands busy, and his mind was occupied with thoughts of the coming manhunt. For some reason, it didn’t seem quite so thrilling in his mind anymore. Maybe because now, he was more impatient for the distraction than for the excitement. Still, he found himself eyeing the hillside as he collected branches, quietly deciding the best direction to run in once the game began. A path too thick with foliage would be hard to move through, but a path too clear wouldn’t offer him anywhere to hide. He knew that all the planning in the world could fall apart in the heat of the moment, but that was part of the fun, right?

Eventually, once he had more than a fair load of dead branches and sticks, Dream headed back to the clearing behind Sapnap’s house. After looking around for a bit, he found a small extinguished fire pit on the south end of the clearing, and dumped his armload of kindling there. He kicked the sticks wherever they lay too closely, so any fire would have room to breathe, although he didn’t bother to set it up any more properly than that.

If he was being generous, he’d guess that the chore had burnt an hour of his time, but that meant he was back to being alone with his thoughts. “Sapnap!” He hollered, dusting off his hands. “I got the firewood!”

The back door of the house opened, Sapnap carrying his bag and Bad carrying an armload of metal skewers. “We’re gonna make campfire shishkabobs!” Bad said eagerly. Sapnap pulled out a wooden cutting board and a knife, and Dream could see several uncut vegetables stuffed in the pack. “It’s pretty easy since you just stab a bunch of veggies and little chicken bits, and it’s really tasty. I thought it’d be a cool lunch, and it would get us all in the camping mood for manhunt!”

Sapnap looked over at Dream with a sheepish grin. “I’m a shit cook but Bad insisted we do something more fun than sandwiches. Besides, it’s basically just advanced marshmallow toasting, right?”

Dream elbowed Bad lightly. “Hey, can you cook mine? If Sapnap makes it, I might get food poisoning and die,” he joked. He barely managed to duck out of the way when Sapnap threw a scrap of raw chicken at his head, wheezing at the close call.

“Dreaaaam, be nice!” Bad said as he fought back giggles. “It’ll be good, I promise!”

Bending down to grab the flint and steel from Sapnap’s pack, Dream tried to get a spark going on

the fire kindling. "Anything I can do to help?" He offered. Admittedly, it was more out of a need to keep busy than any kind of selflessness, but it wasn't nothing, right? When a few embers began to catch, he used one branch to push around the firewood, trying to get the starts of the fire to spread..

Bad seemed to consider the offer for a second before shaking his head. "Nope! Sap says he only has one kitchen knife, and if we stick the cooking skewers in the ground it should be really easy!" He scratched his cheek for a moment before lighting up. "Oh, but I bet there's something you could help George with!" Dream tried not to look too anxious or too eager, silently cursing Bad's innocent suggestion. Apparently taking Dream's silence as a need for further details, Bad continued. "He's dragging some of Sapnap's hay bales around back for something. Since you're really strong I bet he'd love the help!"

Dammit. Well it wasn't like Dream could solve his feelings by avoiding George. Even if it that were an option, what was the point of getting over his feelings if he sacrificed his friendship with George anyway? Their friendship meant everything to Dream. He wasn't going to let anything ruin that, even his own stupid affections. "Gotcha," he said, giving Bad a nod before walking around the side of the house. He was dragging his feet, hesitant to see George. They wouldn't be quite alone together, (thank god), Dream wasn't sure he could take that so soon after coming to terms with the truth of his feelings.

It didn't take long to find George. He was under a small roof on the side of the house, next to a set of open horse stalls. His dark hair had been brushed back from his face, held out of his eyes by the tight strap of his goggles. Despite his short stature, there were hints of muscles and sinew to his body, giving him the strength to pick up one of the heavy bales of hay over his shoulder. The act of lifting made his shirt ride up, the soft angles of his waist just visible, offering a glimpse of the planes of skin where strong muscle shifted into the gentle curves.

Dream quickly averted his eyes, feeling like he'd taken something that wasn't meant for him. George noticed Dream not long after, his cheeks burning red as he adjusted his grip on the hay bale so he could pull his shirt back down. "Hey, Dream," George said. Although he acted nonchalant, the deep blush on his face betrayed his embarrassment, and Dream felt all the more guilty. He knew it was stupid, that it was only a bit of skin he'd seen on accident, and George wouldn't blame him. /God/, though, who gave George the right to be so beautiful?

"Hey Georgie," Dream said, lifting one of the hay bales as well so he could have something to do besides stare. "What'cha doing with these?" He asked, propping it on his shoulder.

George playfully bumped into Dream as he walked past, a teasing bent to his smile. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Oh well, guess you don't need my help," Dream said dramatically, making as if to set the hay

bale he'd carried on top of George's.

"Wait, no, no, my arms are full!" George squealed, pulling away before he could be offloaded with even more to carry. "Geez! You are soooo annoying," he said, biting back laughter. Once he seemed sure Dream wasn't going to give him more to carry, George started walking back towards the clearing behind the house. "Sapnap said I could use these to set up some target practice. I figured getting a bow in manhunt could be a huge advantage, but like, it's not really my specialty."

"Oh, sick!" Dream said, grinning, tagging along behind George. "Still not gonna help you beat me, though."

George just laughed and kept walking. Together, they stacked the hay bales into a makeshift target, just on the edge of the tree line. George filled the crisp autumn air with words, enthusiastically telling Dream about his trip here, his plans for the holidays, how excited he was to try manhunt; Dream listened intently, only speaking up to voice his agreement or tease George about inconsequential things. The light banter eased through the tension like water parting around a boat, their conversation flowing as easily in person as it had been through the screen.

Dream sat on a tree stump, watching George set up. He kicked a line into the dirt a fair distance from the makeshift straw target, grabbing a plain shortbow and a bundle of arrows from his pack, laying them out on the ground next to him. Last, George pulled a line from the bag and began to string the bow.

He slipped the string through the top notch, his muscles bracing as he pulled it taught against the curve of the bow. Satisfied with the tension of the string, George picked up one of the arrows and nocked it, turning his attention to the target. He drew the arrow back, his shoulder muscles tensing as he stretched the bowstring as far as it would go.

After a moment, George loosed the arrow. It flew just past the target, passing so close it knocked a chunk of straw loose. As Dream watched, George raised and released a second arrow, and then a third. Both hit the target this time, buried halfway in. But rather than pleased to have hit, George seemed to be slowly growing more and more frustrated. A fourth arrow, fifth, sixth, and his focused expression has deepened into an exasperated grimace. "I'm not even hitting close to the middle!" He complained, lowering his bow after the seventh arrow only just hit the straw target.

Dream watched with amusement, propping his chin up on his palm. "Have you tried putting on your goggles?" he suggested. "Maybe you could hit the target if you could see."

George shot him an annoyed look. "These aren't to help me see," he said, reaching up and tapping

the goggles on his forehead. “I mean, they are, but not like /that./ I’ve told you I’m colorblind, right? The goggles have enchroma lenses, they make it easier to tell certain colors apart. But that’s not going to make my stupid aim any better.”

Dream paused for a moment, deciding whether it would be more fun to show off his own experience or to watch George’s building frustration. He wondered if George knew how unbearably cute he looked when he was pouting like that.

“You know, I don’t think the problem is your aim, exactly,” Dream said, getting up from his comfortable stump seat and walking over to stand by George. “I think maybe your stance is throwing it off, so the aim of your arrow and your eyes don’t match up.” He mimed drawing a bow of his own. “You should stand more like this, see?”

“That’s how I was standing!” George protested, lowering his bow. “You’re doing the exact same thing I was.”

Dream shook his head, laughing. “What? No way, it’s way different.”

“I don’t see a difference!” George insisted. He straightened up and nocked another arrow, but rather than loosing it at the target, he looked over his shoulder at Dream. “See, just like this! What am I doing differently?”

Dream stepped closer, using one hand to push up George’s back elbow, angling his arm slightly higher. Then, he put his hands on George’s waist, pulling him back to straighten the shorter man’s posture, feeling George’s taught muscles as he guided him. “Don’t hold yourself too tensely,” Dream said, his voice hushed with concentration. “If you’re super stiff, you’ll wear out your muscles faster and fuck over your stamina.”

“Okay,” George said, matching Dream’s quiet tone, moving obediently under Dream’s touch. It suddenly hit Dream how close they were standing, how he could feel the rise and fall of George’s breath alongside his own. The situation seemed far more intimate than it had any right to be. He couldn’t be thinking about things like that. This was only to help George. Dream wouldn’t stay close any longer than he was welcome, as badly as he wanted too.

Taking a deep breath, Dream moved his hands down to George’s hips, half expecting for George to pull away or tell him to cut it out, only for the moment to never come. He guided George’s hips to the left, squaring them directly over his feet. “You need to keep a strong balance while aiming,” he explained, pointing from the hips to the feet. “Hips over feet, shoulders over hips. Any imbalance reaches up through your body and into your arms, so it could throw off your shot.”

Dream leaned his head closer so he could better see the angle George was looking at the target from. His chest brushed against George's back, and as he guided his hands across George's body, it almost felt like Dream was holding him in an embrace. "Your aim is actually pretty good, all things considered," he said absentmindedly, noticing how close some of the arrows had been to the center of the hay bale. Although he'd never seen George fight or shoot, it didn't surprise Dream that he was a decent shot. George had always sounded pretty athletic, though maybe Dream was biased by affection. "To be honest, all you really need are a few small fixes to your stance."

George leaned back, pressing himself into Dream's chest, craning his head back to meet Dream's gaze with a mischievous grin that brought out those cute little dimples. "Oooh, if I'm so good, maybe you shouldn't be helping me then," he said playfully, his eyes glimmering with amusement. "Did you forget you're helping your enemy train for manhunt? How reckless of you, Dreamy."

Dream chuckled, shaking his head. With George looking up at him, the difference in their heights was all the more obvious, and it occurred to Dream how easily he could rest his chin on George's soft, dark hair. "You guys are going to need all the help you can get," he said. Before he could further consider the urge to press his cheek against George's pretty hair, he forced his own attention back to the matter of archery.

"You have a good open stance. Just remember if you're ever firing on uneven terrain, you need to adjust," Dream explained. Without thinking, he lay his arms over George's, lightly cupping the hand on the shaft and the hand on the string, trying to get a feel for George's stance. As he adjusted his position, Dream felt a soft warm breath brush past his fingers, his heart skipping a beat when he realized how close the draw hand was to George's lips. He waited a moment, but George didn't move his hand, and didn't turn his head any further, his calm breathing still washing lightly over Dream's skin. It made his focus waver, his cheeks turning a deep red beneath the mask.

"It's a little weird to give you advice, since I don't shoot left-handed, but having a good stance goes a long way in archery," Dream continued. He kept his eyes locked firmly on the target, not trusting himself to keep his composure if his eyes met with George's again. "Your grip is important too," he explained, "Since having a bad angle can cause torque. Keep your bow grip in the base of your thumb, angled out a bit, and it should keep the arrow pretty steady even once it's loosed."

He tried to think of more advice to give, or some dumb quip to make George laugh, but his mind came up uselessly blank. He searched his mind for answers on what to say or do next. Nothing. They stood there in silence for a moment, their bodies pressed softly into one another, Dream's hands gently guiding George's. For a moment, it seemed they were close enough that Dream could feel George's pulse—but Dream quickly recognized it was his own heart beat, hammering so wildly it felt like his ribs might snap under the pressure.

Dream swallowed against the dryness in his mouth, parting his lips. "George?" He asked quietly. "Are you going to shoot, or...?"

George almost jumped when Dream spoke, laughing sheepishly. "Oh, right!" /Thwipp./ The arrow loosed from George's bow, passing their joined hands on the bow grip as it sliced cleanly through the air. The arrow pierced swiftly through the open clearing, burying the head and the shaft of the arrow deep into the center of the hay bale.

"Yes!" George stepped out of Dream's arms, sprinting a short ways towards the straw target. He threw his arms up in the air, shouting excitedly. "It actually hit the spot I was aiming for! Holy shit, it's like, exact center! I'm basically a sniper!"

Dream wheezed at George's enthusiasm, unable to keep down a smile of his own. He pushed his hands into the pocket of his hoodie and stepped back. "Cool. Now land a hit like that on a moving target, and maybe tomorrow will actually be a little bit of a challenge."

George turned around, grinning proudly. "Oh shut up," he said, walking back and picking up another arrow from the ground. "You know, you're really annoying Dream."

"Thanks. Most people think it comes naturally, but it's actually a lot of hard work," Dream said. He took a step back to give George room, feeling a brief wave of disappointment that he wouldn't need to help guide George quite so closely a second time.

Still, Dream did feel a flutter of pride in his chest as he watched George set up the next shot, shifting his stance to match what Dream had shown him. The arrow loosed through the air, striking the target only a few centimeters away from the one they'd fired together. Dream's tips were all simple advice anyone could have given, and George would've still been a fair shot even without any help, but Dream couldn't help but feel overwhelmingly pleased with his little contribution.

As George started to knock another arrow, their makeshift target practice was cut short by Bad. "Georgie, Dream, lunch is ready!" He called out, waving his arms over his head to get their attention. "I promise all the food is safe! Come eat with us!"

"What does he mean, 'safe'?" George echoed warily, glancing at Dream and raising an eyebrow.

Dream laughed, throwing an arm around George's shoulder. "I mean, when Sapnap's helping, that's a guarantee you're gonna need," he joked. "Come on, let's go eat. You can practice shooting

later or something, I'm starved!"

"God, are you always hungry?" George said, elbowing Dream playfully.

"Pretty much! Maybe if you ate as much as I did, you wouldn't be so short," Dream said, breaking into a grin.

"I'm not that short!"

Rather than bothering with a reply, Dream scooped up George bridal style to prove his point, easily holding his friend far off the ground. As he sprinted back to Sapnap and Bad by the fire pit, with George protesting loudly in his arms, Dream felt warmth bloom in his chest. For just a moment, he could pretend the world was only him and his friends, together in the woods with no responsibilities, no judgement, and no soulmates.

What could it hurt to spend a few days ignoring reality, pretending this could last forever?

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for your support! i have the next few chapters written, hope you'll enjoy :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The boys get ready for manhunt. Dream has some time alone with his soulmate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Alright,” Sapnap announced, walking into the living room with his arms full of paper. He dumped them on the floor, dusting off his hands. “Dream, get the hell out of my house.”

Dream groaned dramatically, sinking deeper into Sapnap’s couch. “What? But I’m comfyyyy,” he complained.

Bonk. George picked up one of the rolled papers, smacking it against Dream’s mask. “More like lazy! C’mon Dream, you can’t be in the room while we have a strategy meeting. It defeats the whole point of it!”

“No, it’s fine, I promise not to listen,” he said, waving his hand dismissively.

Bad made a small hum of disapproval before speaking up. “Well, when the game starts tomorrow, we should probably start by getting tools and armor for everyone--”

“Hell yeah, that’ll give me time to get a million miles away,” Dream said.

Bad immediately responds by throwing a pillow right in Dream’s face. “Alright you muffinhead, out!”

Dream grumbled as he got to his feet, shuffling to the hall like a petulant child. “Stay out for at least an hour,” Sapnap said, waving after Dream. “And don’t be too much of a nuisance around the village, I don’t want to get kicked out because you got bored and burned a house down or something.”

Why was he never allowed to have any fun?

Dream absolutely considered sticking his tongue out at Sapnap, and it was more a matter of his mask being in the way than any form of restraint that kept that impulse down. Of course he didn’t *actually* expect them to let him hang around while they planned, but he wasn’t sure what he’d do on his own for the next hour or more, and he was bored just thinking about it.

He headed out the front door of Sapnap’s house, wandering aimlessly into the village streets, lit only by torchlight. Most folks had already gone inside for the night, wary that stray mobs might creep into the village. It was quiet but for the sound of crickets singing to one another. The streets were peaceful, almost unsettlingly so. Of course, Dream didn’t mind either way, seeing as he didn’t plan to stay on the streets for very long.

Dream approached a small shop that had already closed for the night, the door locked and the windows unlit. He didn’t bother trying to open either, uninterested in getting inside. Instead, he headed around to the chimney at the back of the building. The cracked cobblestone made it easy to find handholds, and it took only a few seconds for him to scramble up the chimney and onto the rooftop.

The air was cold and crisp, the cold autumn breeze carrying a chilly reminder that winter was only a few months away. Now that the sun had set, Dream’s breath bloomed into small clouds of white from beneath his mask, dissipating in the low evening light.

Aside from Sapnap’s house, which was further out from the rest of the village, most of the homes and shops were built rather close to one another. That suited Dream just fine. He leapt from rooftop to rooftop, always landing on his toes to make as little noise as possible, moving across the village quietly. It was easier to be quiet than to explain to irritable villagers why he was jumping on their roofs, after all.

Dream moved with ease that only came from a career of adventuring, clearing the gaps between each rooftop with surprising grace for such a tall person. He had no trouble keeping his footing on the slanted wooden roofs, sprinting across each as easily if it were a paved path. Most of the buildings in this village only had a single floor, which felt considerably less challenging, but Dream was satisfied that at least he could burn off his excess energy in private.

Although he had no particular destination in mind, Dream wasn't completely aimless either, watching the treeline on the outskirts of the village for anything that could be useful for manhunt the next day. Most wouldn't be of much help, seeing as he usually tried to get a lot of distance in right at the start of each game. Still he glanced about for easy resources or ideal means of escape hoping it would give him an idea of which direction to run. Despite this, he found his mind was wandering back to the events of that morning.

It had been as every bit fun as he'd expected it to be spending time with his friends in person. Seeing the way they smiled and laughed, getting to finally hear their voices, having no responsibilities on his mind, it was all he could have asked for. He'd had so much fun hanging out with them, whether they were having stupid inane conversations or hanging out in the yard. That brought to mind thoughts of the archery practice from early that day, and of course, thoughts of George.

The way George's body had fit so neatly against his while they'd worked on archery was... incredible. His shoulders had fit so comfortably in Dream's arms, the top of his head just beneath Dream's chin. Then, there was the subtle warmth, the way George's breath had brushed against Dream's hand, the slight contact between them; every detail of it was still vivid in Dream's mind. He remembered holding his hands over George's to get a feel for the aim, like a phantom embrace. What would it feel like to have George actually pressed against his chest, closer than just a slight brush? Unbidden, an image came to Dream's mind.

George, curled up against Dream's chest; his head resting against Dream's shoulder, his sleepy breath on Dream's collarbone; their arms interlaced, holding one another closely. In his mind's eye, Dream found himself running his fingers through George's hair, pressing his lips softly against George's forehead. He could so clearly imagine George running his hand down Dream's jaw, gentle and slow, that affectionate exasperation in his beautiful raven-hue eyes. Even the idea of such a tender caress made Dream's heart beat faster than the exertion of leaping through the village.

Dream's momentum stopped as he landed on a cobbled roof, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He bit his lip, looking up to the star strewn sky. "God damn it," he muttered, scowling. He was supposed to be fighting back those sorts of feelings. Wasting away the night imagining what it would feel like to cuddle George wasn't going to help him get over his feelings. All it

accomplished was making him feel more alone, more desperate for the affection he had no right to ask for. “God damn it,” he said again.

Still, Dream wasn’t certain how he’d react if *anyone* showed him that sort of affection. Sure, he could take flirting or dirty jokes in stride, but those were just words. The idea of someone actually wrapping their arms around his neck, pressing their body against his... it made him feel off balance. Maybe he was more of a romantic that he’d like to admit. Or maybe he just really needed a hug.

Either way, he couldn’t justify being close to George like that again. It wasn’t fair to George to steal those moments of closeness, and it wasn’t fair to Dream to torment himself over what he couldn’t have. At least manhunt would give him an excuse to put distance between them.

Dream started to move again, his pace across the rooftops of the village slower than before. His attention shifted back to the village around him. A few streets away, the faint sound of music could be heard, echoing through the walls of a small stone church. Probably some late night ceremony or just a small get-together, nothing of much interest. The muffled music was surprisingly energetic for so late in the evening, filled with a sort of wild fun that anyone could tap their feet to.

Well, he was still looking for ways to kill time until he could go back to Sapnap’s place, and he could use a distraction anyway. Not that Dream planned on going inside. He would probably just kill the mood and get a lot of weird stares at his mask. Technically he could take the mask off, but... He didn’t like when strangers saw his face. It wasn’t like Dream had anything to hide, and none of the people here would know him, so it wasn’t as if he’d be judged for who he was. But if someone hated him and he was wearing the mask, well, they couldn’t hate him, because in a way he wasn’t there.

It wasn’t something Dream really knew how to explain. Although Sapnap understood that Dream felt better wearing the mask, he didn’t really understand why, even when Dream had tried to tell him. It was easier to not bother trying to explain to people how the mask felt like armor. If they wouldn’t understand, why waste breath on it?

Even if he had no interest in going inside the small church, though, Dream could still enjoy the music. He landed lightly on a house across the street from it, sitting down on the steep wooden roof. He leaned his head into his hand, closing his eyes and listening to the music. Now that he wasn’t sprinting over rooftops and throwing himself from building to building, the rate of his heart began to ease somewhat, his heavy breath easing into a comfortable rise and fall. He found his

mind drifting, not to his concerns, not to manhunt, and not to George. Just to the cool night air and the sound of the music.

Dream tapped his hand against his knee, keeping with the rhythm of the music. It was a quick beat, but simple enough to keep up with. He hummed under his breath, wondering how long it had been since he'd headed out, and if he could go back to Sapnap's house yet.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Dream jumped, startled by the feeling of someone tapping on his other knee. But he was still alone. Even still, the tapping continued, matching the rhythm of the song Dream had been listening too. After a moment, the feeling stopped. Hesitantly, Dream started tapping again. He held his breath, waiting, until the second set returned, a phantom force tapping along with him on the other knee.

His soulmate.

It was odd, feeling the touch of someone who wasn't there, tapping along to the same song as though they were beside him. The odds they were in the same place seemed impossible. But that meant his soulmate had felt Dream tapping, had taken the time to tap back the same rhythm back as a reply. It was strange, almost endearing.

It was almost like a secret conversation only they shared. For a moment, Dream could pretend he'd never seen the mark on his wrist, or felt the frustrating pattern of scrapes and pokes. He could pretend this moment was something sweet and charming.

Was this what it felt like for other people? A simple, affectionate bond with a complete stranger, a curious urge to know more about who sat on the other side?

But none of that changed anything. None of it changed the shame of growing up as an unwanted soulmate. It didn't change the fact that the universe had pawned him off on a stranger who was

fated to hate him. And it didn't change the fact that Dream didn't even want a goddamn soulmate.

He just wanted George.

Dream tilted his head back, staring up into the infinite expanse of the starry sky, like maybe the constellations would spell out a solution to all his problems. Instead, he only heard the faint sound of a few scant raindrops as they landed on his mask.

Ignoring the fact that his soulmate was still tapping, still keeping up the rhythm Dream had long since dropped, Dream got to his feet. The scattered raindrops continued, slowly growing more and more heavy, cold and chilling. Dream pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt, sliding down the roof and dropping into the street below. Running across wet rooftops in the dark of the night was something too stupid for even Dream to justify. He figured the rain would be a good enough excuse for his early return, and began walking back down the dirt road streets in roughly the same direction he'd come.

The rain steadily picked up, coming down heavier and heavier. The dusty roads began to form puddles of mud and rainwater, and the relentless wind only carried the relentless rain faster. In the short five minutes it took Dream to reach Sapnap's house, the mild drizzle had picked up into a proper downpour, soaking through his clothes and into his skin. Shivering, he knocked against the door.

It was open almost immediately, Bad grabbing Dream by the wrist and hurrying him inside. "You must be so cold Dream! I'm so so sorry we made you go outside. Sapnap, can you light the fireplace?" Bad said, pushing Dream onto the couch and rushing off to grab blankets.

Dream caught Bad by the back of his shirt, laughing and shaking his head. "Whoa Bad, it's fine, I wasn't in the rain for very long."

"But what if you caught a cold?" Bad protested. "We can't all hang out if you're sick!"

While Sapnap passed Dream a cup of coffee, George threw an arm around Bad's shoulder. "Bad, you're a sweetheart, but we *are* adults you know. Dream will be fine." He glanced over at Dream, flashing that cute dimpled smile. "Though to be fair, you should probably change into something that isn't so wet."

Dream shrugged, and started peeling off his soggy green hoodie. He had a tank top underneath, and though it was wet too, it wasn't quite as badly soaked. He pulled the hoodie up over his head with one hand, awkwardly adjusting it so it wouldn't pull his mask off too. "Sap, do you have any towels? Or somewhere I can hang this up?" he asked.

Bad immediately snatched the hoodie, announcing he'd clean it and grab towels, before darting off. It was a bit jarring, but over the past day or two they'd all been together, Dream had gotten the sense that Bad liked doing nice things for their friends. That sort of spontaneous help was something that Dream was still getting used to.

"Bad might have been right about starting a fire," George said, wrapping his arms around himself and turning around to look out the window, though if he was looking at anything in particular Dream couldn't tell. "I'm absolutely freezing! Sapnap, why is your house so damn drafty?"

Sapnap protested, shoving George lightly. "Shut up, my house is great! Besides, I'm not cold at all." Regardless, he did walk over to the fireplace, kneeling down to light the ashy logs. Eventually, a small fire caught, casting the living room in a halo of warmth. "There. Don't say never do anything for you."

"All you did was start a fire, it's not that big of a deal," George said.

"Fine, if you're *so* cold," Sapnap said, grabbing a blanket from one of the armchairs and tossing it at George. "Then we can sit together and I'll warm you up."

George held the blanket to his chest, pouting as he sat down on the couch. "Nope! You're being rude, so I'll sit with Dream," he said decisively, scooting up against Dream's side. Sapnap met Dream's eyes, shooting him a sheepish grin that either was an apology or a '*you're welcome.*' Either way, Dream decided he was absolutely going to kill Sapnap for this.

But, George *was* warm. He threw the blanket over both himself and Dream, leaning against Dream's side. George rubbed his own arms to stave off the cold, completely oblivious to Dream's stare. Maybe it was just the shared body heat, or maybe it was the lit fireplace, or maybe it was the way his skin burned with a hot red blush, but Dream felt considerably less cold.

Sapnap could tell Dream was anxious, and tried again to intervene. "Geooooorge, let me cuddle too," he said, his tone playfully whiny. It would have at least eased the tension for Dream to have a third party involved, but George was, of course, unaware of Dream's predicament.

"No," George said smugly, though his voice was softer. Dream glanced down at George again, his heart missing a beat, watching George yawn. George's head lowered, resting against Dream's shoulder, his eyes slowly sliding shut. In a matter of seconds, he had fallen asleep against Dream.

Dream looked over at Sapnap, but his friend only grinned. With the one hand that George wasn't sleeping on, Dream lifted his mask slightly, mouthing "help." Sapnap, the traitorous bastard, just grinned more, putting a hand over his mouth as though fighting back laughter. He'd been so quick to give up on interfering. He tried to stay mad that his friend had been so quick to give up on saving him, but he didn't want to wake George.

He'd fallen asleep so fast. It made sense, since he was probably still at the tail-end of recovering from his trip, and they'd all had such a busy day. It was late now too, and Dream could feel exhaustion of his own creeping up. Would it be more or less weird if he fell asleep too? If sleeping on the couch with George was too close, then surely so was watching George sleep. Dream could just wake up George. But the idea made him feel guilty. Seeing as Sapnap had no plans to help, Dream truly was stuck.

Though, there were much, much worse places to be trapped.

Chapter End Notes

quq my motivation has been struggling but reading your guys's comments keeps me going <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The day of manhunt finally arrives. Dream has an unexpected conversation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“--up. Dreaaaamie Dream-Dream, come on you little muffin, it’s time.”

Dream yawned, rubbing his eyes as he slowly came to. Where was he? The last thing he could remember was getting back to Sapnap’s house, then... Fuck, he’d fallen asleep on the couch with George. Dream shot upright, glancing around anxiously. The living room was still dark, only a faint pink light barely glinting off the windows.

Bad was kneeling next to the couch, and smiled brightly when Dream woke up. “Hey sleepyhead! It’s dawn, that’s when you wanted to start manhunt, right?”

Dream looked around the living room, nodding as he shook off the last bit of sleepiness. “Where’s George?” he asked hesitantly.

“He and Sap are outside already,” Bad said, getting to his feet. “They wanted to go over our strategy one more time! Come outside when you’re ready.”

Although Dream wasn’t normally one for getting up early, the reminder that manhunt was about to begin filled him with energy. He hurried back to the guest room Sapnap was lending him, grabbing his bag and boots. Everything he had, from his sword to his map and compass, Dream moved into the dresser. As the rules of manhunt stated, he could only take three things; the clothes on his back, an empty backpack, and his phone. No torches, no weapons, no food.

Dream tightened the straps of his bag, almost uncomfortably tight, so it wouldn’t fall off in the

inevitable chase. He tightened his mask too, and pulled his hood up over his hair. He took a minute to stretch, waking up his body and finishing the last of his mental preparations. Briefly, he pressed his ear to the door, checking to see if any of the hunters were waiting for him.

Through the muffling of the wood, it took him a moment to recognize Bad's voice. Apparently he hadn't joined the others outside yet. "--don't want to do this if you won't be okay," he was saying. "No you dumb muffin, I care about you! No, it won't. Yeah. Yeah. I'll be back before you know it, promise."

Dream tried to make out any other voices, but he couldn't hear anyone. Bad was probably on the phone, and although it wasn't really any of Dream's business, he wanted to keep an ear out for when the coast was clear.

"I know. I miss you so much, and I'm going to give you the biggest hug when I get home," Bad was saying. "Yeah! And I-- wait, wait Skeppy don't say that! Now if I don't say it back I'm going to feel bad! Oh my goodness, stop laughing! You're so embarrassing. Okay, okay, okay. I love you too you big goofball. Bye."

Dream felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment as he realized just exactly what kind of conversation he'd overheard. Was that Bad's soulmate? Although Bad had sounded exasperated and flustered, he'd also sounded... well, happy didn't seem to be a strong enough word. It was a side of Bad that Dream hadn't really seen before. Warm, comfortable, close. The brief conversation seemed like a microcosm of everything soulmates were *supposed* to be, everything Dream had always envied.

Dream was happy for Bad.

It was a shame that happiness could hurt so damn much.

Dream dragged his mind back to the game of manhunt at hand, annoyed he'd let himself stew in his own bitterness for even a moment. Those feelings didn't matter, at least not right now. After all, if anything could get Dream out of his own head, it was a game of manhunt. He listened at the door a while longer, waiting til he was sure Bad had gone outside too. Before putting his phone in his pocket, he opened the group chat, typing in a quick message.

Dream: See you losers at The End

Without giving any of them time to check their phones and read the message, Dream sprinted back through the living room, slamming the door open. He didn't stop to talk to George, Sapnap, and Bad. He didn't say hello, or even announce the game had started. Dream just took off running, kicking up dirt and grass as he headed straight for the treeline.

"Dream, what are you--"

"He's making a run for it! Go, go, go!"

Dream cackled, stealing a glance over his shoulder. The three hunters started running. Everyone but Sapnap had been caught off guard by the sudden start. Sapnap, of course, was used to it.

Without slowing his pace, Dream reached up above his head. He snapped off a few low hanging branches and shoved them into his bag for later. The others were only a few seconds behind. No time to slow down. Amongst the various birch trees, he noticed an old gnarled oak with low hanging branches. Dream jumped up, leaping from branch to branch, barely having time to think before acting.

The climb into the tree bought him precious seconds, just long enough to make a shoddy wooden axe. By then the hunters were practically on top of him, so Dream had to get moving again. He leapt from the oak into the wooden arms of the tall birches, the flimsier branches threatening to snap beneath his weight.

Behind him, the hunters were shouting to each other. *Grab wood. Stick together. Faster, don't let him get away.* Dream leapt to another tree, then another, tossing himself recklessly through the foliage. His friends weren't as agile and lithe in the trees, so the race through the canopy bought Dream another few seconds. He used his axe to rip off a chunk of wood, hastily strapping it to a

stick to make a crude pickaxe.

“Oh Dreaaaaam!” Dream glanced back, his eyes meeting George’s. The hunter was only two jumps away, Sapnap not far behind. Dammit, he’d thought he had more of a lead on them. Dream needed to run, but it was hard to move away from that mischievous smile, that dangerously cute voice. “We’re coming to get you!”

Dream clipped the makeshift tools to either side of his belt, shooting George a quick grin. “Thanks for the warning.”

He threw himself out of the tree. He leaned forward as he fell, his arms outstretched, reaching as far as he possibly could. Dream’s hands barely made contact with the rough bark of another branch. He only just managed to catch himself, hurriedly pulling himself up. It was a stupidly risky jump, so hopefully the hunters would hesitate to follow. Dream didn’t wait to find out. He only kept running from tree to tree, ignoring the slight friction burn on his palms.

Eventually, their voices fell away behind Dream. Hopefully it meant he’d lost them, but it was more likely the hunters had fallen back to regroup. Dream leapt down to the lower branches of the tree he ended up in, then dropped the last few feet to the grass and soil below. While he caught his breath, he pulled his phone out of his pocket, turning on the tracker app he’d set up. They’d be able to figure out where Dream was, or whatever direction he’d been going if the signal cut out. Maybe it’d be easier if Dream knew where they were too, but “easier” meant less of a challenge. A notification popped up at the top of the screen.

George: Does he always do this?

Sapnap: Cheat? Oh yeah like every time we played manhunt he’d pull this kinda shit

Dream: It’s not cheating! I said manhunt started at dawn, it was dawn, so I ran. Not my fault you guys are slow lol

Bad: Hey Dreamy, where are youuuu? ^^

Dream: Do you really think I'm dumb enough to tell you

George: I don't think you want us to answer that :P

Dream: Damn, you're supposed to kill me not call me out

Dream put a hand over his mouth, biting back laughter on the off-chance the three hunters could be close enough to overhear. As much fun as it was to joke with the others, he'd have to put their conversation on hold if he planned to win. He needed to keep moving, and more importantly, he needed to find a cave.

Dream kept to the undergrowth, taking care to avoid any worn paths or open stretches of woodland. There wasn't much in the way of stony outcroppings or chasms in the earth here, but Dream was fairly certain he'd seen a ravine to the east on his trip to Sappap's home. Even in the unlikely case the ravine had already been stripped of all its resources, it would offer a fair place to dig, as well as plenty of pockets of stone to hide in. He'd be safer from the hunters there, even if only for a little while. Monsters might be a bit more of a problem, but Dream had experience dealing with those.

He travelled carefully, constantly ready to flee the moment someone made themselves known. However, it seemed that whatever the hunters were up to had them otherwise occupied. Still, that didn't make Dream relax. After all, if they weren't here attacking him, they could be making weapons or traps.

As he walked, Dream's mind turned to the issue of survival. It was easy to forget that the hunters weren't his only threat. He'd need food and fresh water. The initial raucous of the manhunt seemed to have scared off any nearby wildlife, so hunting would wait. Still, he did pocket a few wildberries as he went. He could worry about getting some proper food later.

Finding the ravine was easy enough, and Dream had climbed enough rock faces to begin slowly scaling his way down. It wasn't hard to find cracks or overhangs in the rough earth wall, and once he was most of the way down, he let himself drop. Thankfully, it seemed Sappnap's hometown wasn't populated by miners; veins of coal and iron still marked the ravine walls. After quickly exchanging his wooden supplies for a few made of stone, Dream got to work ripping the iron ore from the walls. Unfortunately, there was less than he'd thought at first glance, most of the veins of iron not going much deeper than the surface. So, as Dream got to work building a small stone furnace and starting a fire inside, he thought of what to do with his limited options.

First things first, he made himself a bucket, and after digging through a pile of nearby gravel, he put together a flint and steel as well. There'd be no going forward in manhunt without those, so there was no question they came first. That left him with six more ingots worth of iron.

Dream knelt in front of the furnace, shifting around the crackling lumps of coal with a stick as he thought over his options. If he made a sword, he would have enough left over to forge a pair of boots. That wasn't much, but it was certainly more protection than he had at the moment. Then again, if he skipped the armor he could make an axe and a shield, and he could hold onto the left over iron until he got enough for some proper armor. The latter would probably serve Dream better; he could get more power into the swing of an axe, and he trusted his own reflexes to protect him better than a pair of boots.

"Agh, fuck," Dream hissed, pulling back from the furnace when a wayward ember hit his hand. It was a tiny, mild burn, but it still hurt like a bitch. He took a sharp breath in through his teeth, wishing he had some water to pour over the burn and ease the sting.

Then, he felt scraping.

Immediately his soulmate came to mind, although this time, the sensation was different. Rather than repeated scrapes and jabs in one spot, it was like a shape being scratched across the skin. It took Dream a second to recognize the shapes, the pattern the scratches were etching out. It was invisible letters being scratched against his skin. His mind raced as he tried to focus on what the letters spelled out.

'Ow.'

Dream rolled his eyes, but his mind was still intent on the scratching. He felt his heart jump when it picked up again, new letters this time.

'You ok?'

Dream stared at the palm of his hand where the invisible letters were drawn, a brief breathlessness overtaking him. After all this time dreading the day he'd have to speak to his soulmate, it was happening, and they *still* hadn't even met. And now, they were asking if he was okay. But weren't they supposed to hate him? What about the word on his wrist? Dream felt his heart drop.

They didn't hate Dream *yet*. Goddammit, did that mean it wasn't fate's fault? Was it him? He was so caught up in a whirlwind of thoughts, it took him a good minute to realize he should try to say something back. Palm face up, he scratched letters against his own skin. "*Fine.*"

'Shit it's you.'

Not the most welcoming start.

"Yeah?"

'Sorry, been trying to talk for a long time. Excited.'

Goddamn that was a lot of letters. Dream almost wished the scratches were visible, because trying to picture each one in his mind's eye got hard after a few words. It definitely wasn't an efficient way of communicating. But as he pieced the message together, he found himself feeling lost, wary.

They'd been trying to talk to him for a long time? Maybe *that* was the reason for the scratches and pokes. Maybe it was some other language, or a code. His soulmate had been trying to reach out to him. Dream's soulmate was *excited* to talk to him. Dream pulled back the sleeve of his hoodie, wondering if somehow he'd misread his soulmark for years, or if it had suddenly changed. Of course, it was the same as it always was.

His soulmate didn't hate him for no reason; his soulmate actually did want to know Dream. And still, the first time they saw Dream, their first thoughts would be "*creepy*." They'd meet him and be uncomfortable or unhappy. They wouldn't hate him because fate said so. They'd hate him for who he was. And that felt so, so much worse.

'Radiant.'

Dream jumped, remembering he was mid "conversation" with his soulmate. But the word wasn't being traced on his palm, it was on his wrist, overtop the soulmark that branded him as a creep. It occurred to Dream that it wasn't a message, but a thoughtless act; his soulmate tracing their own mark as they waited for a reply. Dream's face burned bright red, feeling a wave of embarrassment that someone carried such a sappy thought from him on their wrist.

He couldn't deal with this. Especially not right now. After a lifetime of resentment, he wasn't about to suddenly change his mind about the whole concept of soulmates. Besides, what was the point of trying to build a connection? His soulmate's first thoughts were already decided. If Dream got friendly with his soulmate, it would only make him feel awful all over again when everything inevitably came crumbling down. Even if things could work out positively with his soulmate, what would the point be?

He was still in love with George. Even if things did somehow turn out fine between Dream and his soulmate, he still couldn't give them the one thing they were owed. He couldn't just stop loving George, even if it was tearing him apart inside.

Finally, he scratched out a reply on his palm. "*Busy*," was all he wrote. He waited for a few seconds, guilt rearing in his stomach. Hastily, he added a quick "*Sorry*."

After a moment, a quick reply was scratched into his palm. *'Ok. Stay safe. Talk again*

soon? Dream was an asshole, but whether it was his morals or his guilt speaking, he decided he wasn't enough of an asshole to say no, sending a quick "*Sure*" as he gathered his things from the dying furnace.

The smart thing to do would be to stay in the ravine longer, since he'd surely find more iron and resources if he took his time. But Dream needed to move. He couldn't outrun his own skin, but he could cloud his mind with adrenaline, and busy his hands with the work of survival. That would be enough. That *had* to be enough, for the sake of Dream's own sanity.

Although Dream was normally agile and coordinated, his head was a mess with emotions. His steps felt heavy as he started the climb out of the ravine, gripping to the sheer wall of stone tighter than was really necessary. It was a more difficult climb to go up than it had been to get down. But his mind wasn't on the climb, his thoughts caught between George and his soulmate.

Dream barely noticed the clicking of bones, barely turned in time to notice a skeleton had dragged itself out of the shadows. Still, only inches from the top of the ravine, he had no time to react when the skeleton fired an arrow directly at him. A wheeze of pain barely managed to escape his lips before his grip broke.

He had a few seconds where the wind whipped past him, a moment before it struck him that he was falling. The thought had only barely registered by the time he hit the ground with a sickening crack.

Chapter End Notes

ouch :c

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Recovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream blinked, his vision blurring as he stared blankly up. He could just see the empty sky, framed by the edge of the ravine. He wasn't sure how far he'd fallen. Enough to hurt, that was for damn sure. His entire back was bruised and cut. There was still an arrow stuck in one of his arms. Dream was only snapped out of his daze by a second arrow, narrowly passing over his head.

Spitting curses like acid, Dream grabbed his axe and shield, staggering to his feet. It wasn't difficult to take out one skeleton on his own. Still, every step, every strike, every deflection made his body tense in pain. He panted for breath, feeling a momentary wave of relief once the skeleton was smashed to bone.

Soon, though, the adrenaline began to fade, and the pain began to kick in. Dream dragged himself beneath a small outcropping of stone, breathing heavily. He couldn't climb out of the ravine, not in this state. But if he stayed, more monsters could spawn. Or the hunters could track him down-- Dream wasn't going to lose just because he had potentially broken a few bones.

With not much in the way of options, Dream crawled into a small dip in the stone wall. It was too shallow to be a cave, but it was good enough. He managed to drag a few rocks in front of it, despite how the effort made his body throb, but the pathetic wall was better than nothing. However, setting up the makeshift hideout had well and truly taken the last of Dream's energy, and he practically collapsed on the floor.

Dream didn't feel ready to analyze the damage from the fall, dreading the possibility that he'd broken something. He turned his attention first to the arrowhead still lodged in his left arm. He ripped the sleeve off, ripping the torn and bloodied fabric away, setting aside the pieces that were intact enough to use. He knew this definitely wasn't the best way to bandage a wound, but he didn't really have a roll of disinfectant and bandages on hand.

With his right hand, Dream took hold of the arrowhead. He began to pry it loose, grinding his teeth together to keep himself from screaming in pain. It was almost more painful to remove than it had been to get shot. Regardless, he managed to keep from crying out, and once the arrowhead was wrenched free he quickly wrapped the injury.

He could vaguely feel something on his hand. Letters, frantically being scratched against his skin, his soulmate trying to reach out. It was too much to understand, especially with the foggy pain had brought to his mind. Maybe if the situation were different Dream would have felt bad for his soulmate, but at the moment he was in a considerable amount of pain, so it was just a /little/ bit hard to think about anything else.

Dream propped himself up against the cave wall, trying to focus on taking deep breaths. Other than some minor scrapes, he didn't seem to be bleeding. Still, he ran his hands over his legs, trying to see if anything felt broken or crooked. Once he was fairly certain his legs *weren't* shattered, he checked his ribs. There was the possibility something was cracked, but best he could tell, the impact had just left him severely sore and bruised. He was lucky, if falling from a cliff could ever be considered "lucky."

So long as his hunch was right and nothing was *actually* broken, Dream figured it would be fine to go ahead with the game of manhunt. But he wasn't sure he had the energy to gather resources, let alone climb back out of the ravine. His only options were to spend the night there and hope he wasn't found, or to forfeit--and forfeiting wasn't really an option in his mind. The pain probably wouldn't completely clear up after one night of sleep, but Dream's competitive side outweighed his logical side (as it so often did) so he made up his mind to head out as soon as it was dawn.

Until then, all he could really do was lie in the quickly darkening ravine, hoping the pain would subside enough for him to get some sleep.

It was hard to relax, though. If he was caught here, he'd have nowhere to run. And if it were hostile mobs that caught him and not his friends, well, they wouldn't be very sympathetic to his situation. Dream had been attacked by a zombie once, when he was still just a dumb kid who didn't know how to protect himself. Even as nonplussed as he was over death, that was a particularly gruesome and painful end to meet. Hopefully, he at least had enough energy to swing his axe if anything found him.

Dream almost jumped when he felt something press against his shoulder. It was a gentle, warm pressure, leaned firmly against his side. But there was nothing there that he could see, and more interestingly, the touch didn't make his bruises ache. He'd barely been able to check himself for broken bones with how badly everything hurt, but this invisible touch seemed to press against the bruises harmlessly.

The pressure enveloped him, gentle and warm, like a comforting hug. No, not *like* a hug--it was one, ghostly arms holding him in a soothing embrace.

It was Dream's soulmate. It had to be. That was why the touch didn't make his bruises sting. The feeling was more in his mind than anything else, a reflection. Was his soulmate holding themselves, or was someone there with them? It occurred to Dream the comfort may not even be meant for him. His soulmate probably felt the impact of the fall too. Dream tried not to feel too guilty for the pain he'd accidentally caused.

Actually, it was hard to feel much of anything. All Dream could think about was the embrace wrapped around him. It was a soft affectionate feeling, and the closest thing Dream could think to compare it to was the way his mother had hugged him when he was little. It was different in a way he didn't know how to describe, but nonetheless, it was a feeling Dream hadn't known he'd been missing. The warmth made him melt, every muscle going blissfully limp. He felt unreasonably comfortable for someone laying on a rugged stone floor.

Then, there were hands running through his hair, wrapping around his chest, gently rubbing his back. There were people with his soulmate, giving them comfort. Even if it wasn't meant for him directly, he felt grateful for it, put at ease by each gentle touch.

One of the unseen hands ran up along Dream's arm, gingerly brushing its fingers across the bandaged wound left by the arrow. Dream put a hand over the spot, even though it made him wince. The other invisible hand stilled. They occupied the same space, both touching the same skin.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Words were being spelled out in his palm again, although this time so soft and gingerly that Dream

might not have noticed if he weren't lying still.

'You're hurt?'

Dream grunted as he shifted his body, trying to sit upright without making every muscle erupt in protest.

"Yeah. Sorry."

There was a long pause, and for a moment Dream wondered if he hadn't drawn the letters clearly enough for his soulmate to understand. Eventually, though, a reply did come.

'I just got done telling you to stay safe.'

Dream bit back a laugh, closing his eyes, leaning into the cave wall as though he were leaning into the embraces his soulmate was so lucky to be enjoying.

"Shit happens."

'Be careful. I can't spend my whole life worrying about some idiot.'

“No one is making you.”

‘I care about you.’

“You don’t even know me.”

‘You don’t have to know someone to want them to not fall off a building.’

Dream expected to feel annoyed or angry, the familiar bitter feelings that always came with the subject of soulmates. Instead, he found himself fighting back a smile.

“How romantic.”

‘For real though, one of my friends is saying he’ll beat you up if you keep getting hurt.’

“That seems counterproductive.”

‘Are you going to be ok?’

“Yeah I think I could win a fight against your friend.”

'I was talking about you getting shot off a building.'

Even though Dream knew there was no future with his soulmate, even though he knew any friendships wouldn't survive their first real meeting, he felt uncomfortable with the idea of them worrying about him.

"I'm an adventurer. I get shot a lot."

'Mood. Just try not to fall off a building every day, ok?'

"No promises."

The conversation died down after that, gone in favor of that strange shared embrace. The motions eventually slowed into a steady comforting weight, as though Dream's soulmate had fallen asleep wrapped in the arms of their friends. Sooner than expected, the light that fell in the ravine turned a brilliant shade of orange, then a gentle pink, before fading into soft blues that gave away to the darkness that followed sunset.

For a brief moment, Dream didn't think about the soulmate destined to hate him. He didn't think about George's stupidly cute laugh, and his own painfully unrequited feelings. He didn't even think about the pain that burned in every muscle. And in that period of thoughtless bliss, with unknown strangers cuddling him from a distance, sleep finally took Dream.

Chapter End Notes

i'm a few chapters ahead in writing rn, we've got some fun stuff coming up :)

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The hunters catch up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning came, and although Dream still felt like everything but his ego was bruised black and blue, he dragged himself from his makeshift cave and out into the ravine. Luckily, it didn't look like the hunters had caught up to him over night, and the hostile mobs had been too stupid to find his hiding place. He'd have to work hard to make up lost time, but that wasn't a problem. After changing the bandage on his arrow wound and eating the last of the smushed wildberries he'd grabbed the day before, Dream pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked his messages.

Bad: Good morning everyone!

Sapnap: Bad you're sitting right next to us

Bad: It's not fair if I say good morning to you and George but not to Dream :(

George: No good mornings for Dream until we beat him

Bad: Awww :((

Dream: Don't worry Bad, Georgie is just cranky he had to wake up before noon

George: Fuck you too Dream

Bad: George!

Sapnap: Hey Bad, you should swear with us lol

Bad: NO!!!

Dream: Ooooh, Bad's gonna swear?

Bad: No!! The Muffintees don't curse! D:

George: Bad named our team

Dream: Cute lol

George: Ooooo don't make me jealous Dream ;)

Goddammit. When he'd been repressing his feelings, Dream was more than happy to initiate the teasing flirting. Hell, he got excited when George joined in. But now, the joke hit differently. He tried to think of some snarky quip to shoot back, but the wheels in his head were spinning wildly, and giving no answers.

Dream: Maybe I want you to be jealous

It was a joke, of course, it had always been a joke. George had no reason to take it any other way, but Dream couldn't help but wonder if somehow George would see through him, if he would realize that maybe this time, Dream kind of meant it.

Sapnap: Ew, get a room

Bad: We're camping, wouldn't getting a room be kind of against the spirit of the thing?

George: The only room Dream is going to need is a hospital room, because we're gonna crush him

Dream: Jokes on you, I'm already in full diamond on my way to the End

Bad: Don't be cocky just because you got a head start! We won't lose! Dream! ^^

Dream: I got like, a five second head start, that's nothing

Sapnap: He's not talking about you cheating and running into the woods, stupid

George: It's not important. We just got a bit sidetracked last night

Well, at least the playing field was a bit more even. Dream felt a bit curious about what exactly George was referring to, but he needed to turn his focus back to the game. After all, he still had a rather unpleasant task ahead of him. He had to climb back out of this damn ravine. Even though he'd slept off the worst of the pain, Dream was still sore all over, and the ascent up was slow and miserable.

Once he'd made it to the top, the first thing Dream did was check his surroundings. The trees were sparser around the ravine, with an open valley to his north, and the visibility reassured him that he was safe for the time being. Even if there was no sign of the hunters yet, though, it would be only a matter of time before they caught up. Dream took a mental inventory of his options, and started walking out towards the valley. The lack of cover would make it easier for him to be found, but there were a few mountains in the distance that might have the lava vents he'd need. Going around the valley could take days, but if he cut through, he could probably make it by nightfall, and maybe even catch a few rabbits as he went.

Still, he hated being out in the open like this. It did give him plenty of space to run if the hunters saw him, but it also meant he didn't have many places to run *to*, and there were no obstacles he could use to slow his friends down. There had to be a better way to stay ahead. He considered his options as he walked, thinking up various traps and strategies he could use. If only he had more resources.

Since his breakfast hadn't been more than a handful of crushed berries, hunger caught up with Dream fairly quick. He'd been right about finding rabbits in the valley, though, having managed to catch two without even deviating from his path. It felt risky to stay in one place, especially out in the open like this, but he needed to stop and eat if he was going to keep going.

He dug through his backpack to grab some of the wood he'd gathered the day before, setting up a small campfire a ways away from the taller grass. He lit the fire with his flint and steel, and got to work cooking the rabbit meat. Even if they knew Dream's rough direction, he didn't want to make it easier to find him, and the smoke from the campfire would be a dead giveaway. He took off his hoodie, using it to fan away the smoke, dispersing it before it could rise too high. Unfortunately, his focus on keeping the smoke cleared distracted him long enough that the rabbit meat started burning.

Dream hurriedly put out the fire, and once he figured that meat was still *mostly* edible, he used his axe to slash it into small strips, like pieces of poorly-made jerky. It was dry and tasted like charcoal, but at least it filled him up. He kicked dirt over the last dying embers of the campfire to make sure it didn't spread once he left.

Although it was autumn, the skies were clear and the sun was high, so the day was still fairly hot. Rather than putting his hoodie back on, Dream tied the sleeves around his waist. He wore his hoodies on hot days plenty of times before, but sometimes it was just nice to enjoy the sun on his skin. He took a deep breath in, tilting his head back so he could feel the sun's warmth against his skin. For a moment he considered taking off his mask. He was alone after all, and it would be nice to just take in the warm weather.

"Oh *Dreaaaaam!*"

Dream turned around, his heart bursting into a frantic breakaway. George, Bad, and Sapnap were all *right* there, less than a hundred meters away. Somehow, they'd manage to get close without him seeing or hearing them. Though Bad had mentioned something had slowed them down the day before, it looked like they were still much better equipped than Dream. They all had shields and iron axes, and at least two pieces of iron armor each.

Goddammit. Dream turned and ran, laughing as if he weren't startled to see them. Even if he didn't have armor, he was confident enough in his battle skills that he could take on one of them, maybe two if he was lucky. But at the moment, his only option was to try and put distance between them as fast as he could. He scanned the area ahead of him, trying to find some place he could take cover or get out of reach. Nothing. "Leave me alone!" he yelled.

He could hear Sapnap shouting something back, probably some dumb quip, but Dream didn't quite hear it over the sound of his own heartbeat. His adrenaline was pumping wildly, driving him to run faster. Something caught his eye. There was a single tall spruce tree growing alone in the valley. There wasn't time to come up with a plan or a better escape route. They were too close.

Dream found no trouble in scaling the rough bark of the tree. Though the sparse lower branches may have made it a tricky climb for most folks, Dream had always been an avid climber. He managed to scramble up to a branch nearly twenty feet in the air before he realized none of the higher branches would hold his weight. About the same time, the hunters arrived at the base of the tree, shouting eagerly when they saw he was cornered.

"Bad, cover up that pond, don't let him jump down!" George yelled. He and Sapnap stopped at the

trunk of the tree, craning their heads back to look up at Dream. “Dreaaaaammmmm, there’s nowhere to run,” George said, grinning up at him. Even at this distance, Dream swore he could make out dimples in George’s cheeks. It made his heart stutter. “Now be good and climb down so we can kill you.”

Dream tapped his chin, pretending to think about it. “Tempting offer, but no thanks. I think I’m just gonna live up here now.” He glanced over, noticing that Bad was placing stone over the only nearby pond. He hadn’t even noticed it before climbing the tree, but now his best means of escape was being guarded. Damn.

“Dude, just because we can’t climb as fast as you doesn’t mean we can’t come up there,” Sapnap said, waving his axe around. “And even if we couldn’t, you’d run out of food eventually. It’s game over, we won!”

Dream was not going to let a little thing like being completely surrounded stop him from winning. He put his hands behind his head and whistled, pretending to lounge about. Though, because the branches up that high were thin, he nearly tumbled right off. As Dream hurriedly regained his balance, he could hear George giggling at the close call. Damn, that wasn’t fair. That cute laugh made Dream want to fall again and again and again.

“Dream, oh my god,” George said, clapping one hand over his mouth. “You’re going to fall, you idiot.”

“God?” Dream echoed, cackling wildly. “There is no God up here George, other than me!”

George burst into a fit of laughter, shaking his head in spite of the dopey grin on his face. “You’re so stupid, Dream.”

He wasn’t wrong. Dream really couldn’t help being a bit stupid when George was around. “Come on Georgie, why don’t you shoot me down? What about all that archery practice? Scared you’ll miss?” he said, grinning playfully and swinging his legs.

“I haven’t had time to craft a bow and arrows, obviously!” George sputtered, his face flushing a dark red. God, Dream loved that flustered pout. He loved the way George blushed so hard he lit up like a lighthouse. He loved all of it.

Honestly, it made it kind of hard to focus on the fact that he was basically trapped.

The Muffintees (as Bad was apparently calling them) gathered beneath Dream’s tree, discussing their options. They didn’t bother trying to be secretive this time, seeing as there wasn’t really anything Dream could do one way or another. Bad suggested they try to wait Dream out, but the hunters had no idea what resources Dream had, and from the sound of it, they didn’t have the food for a full-on stakeout. George suggested they try lighting the tree on fire with a flint and steel. Although Dream thought the idea of leaping from a burning tree sounded exciting, Sapnap rightly pointed out that Dream had done enough parkour to land a twenty foot jump, and they had no way to stop the fire from spreading to the tall grass in the valley.

Eventually, they settled on Sapnap’s plan. It was probably the most boring and straightforward of the three plans, but even Dream could begrudgingly admit it was probably the most likely to succeed. One of them would come up and try and knock him out of the tree. The other two would wait below, ready to attack the moment he hit the ground. While Bad and George took their positions either side of the tree and Sapnap started to climb, Dream tried to go over his options.

He could always jump. He’d safely landed falls from this high before, even if it was tricky. But Bad and George would be ready for Dream, and he wasn’t even sure if he could pull off a landing like that when he was still covered in bruises. If only he’d found an enderman already, he could’ve spent a pearl to escape and gotten a head start on running too. Honestly, there was no way out of this if it was going to be three against one.

Which meant he was going to need to even the odds a bit.

Dream stood up on his branch, holding his breath when it creaked beneath his weight. Thankfully, it didn’t break. He began moving from branch to branch, not going further up or down, just trying to break the hunters’ visual on him through the pine needles. He listened as the branches below shifted around Sapnap. The problem with breaking line-of-sight with the hunters meant Dream couldn’t really see them either, so he had to hope he could estimate the distance by sound. If Dream was going to make it out of this alive, he’d need to act first.

He made sure his shield and backpack were strapped on tight, not wanting to risk losing either in the struggle. The sound of climbing was closer. Sapnap was likely only a few meters below Dream now. The branches obscured the view and made it difficult to say for sure. Dream took a deep breath, rolling back his shoulders. He unhooked his axe from his belt, balancing on the branch so he could hold the weapon with both hands.

A familiar head of messy black hair poked up through the branches. The moment they made eye-contact, Sapnap lunged for Dream. He tried to tackle him out of the tree. But Dream was ready, and he was fast.

With a nasty crunch, Dream's axe smashed into the side of Sapnap's head. The force of the blow knocked Sapnap back, crashing through the branches, hitting the ground with a dull thud. Blood dripped off the blade of the axe. Dream stumbled to catch his balance, panting for breath.

As accustomed as he was to temporary death, there was always a brief unsettling moment after the fact, a moment where the body stayed unmoving on the ground. But the tension was over soon enough as Sapnap's body burst in a puff of white smoke, his items scattering on the floor. A notification came through on his phone, and although Dream was still in a tight spot, he stole a quick glance.

Sapnap: Dream you dickhead, that fucking hurt! Had to be in the head, man, geez :/

Sapnap: George, Bad, avenge me!

"I'll get his stuff!" Bad called out to George, rushing to move Sapnap's belongings back into the backpack. "You get Dream!"

“What? No way, he’s going to axe me too!” George protested, glaring up at Dream with his arms crossed.

Dream leaned out, holding onto a branch so he could lean out further without falling. He met George’s eyes, wheezing. “Come on Gogy,” he cooed, resting his axe across his shoulders. “Come up and playyyy. Unless you’re scared? Are you scared of me *Georgie*?”

Even if it was obvious bait and both of them knew it, George was too stubborn to back down. He scowled, running to the base of the tree and starting to climb the trunk. Dream shifted his position, crouching down and readying his axe. He was sure he could tell where George was; he didn’t seem to be a particularly quiet climber. Once it was just Bad left, Dream was fairly sure he could get far enough away from the hunters to make some real progress. All he needed was to wait for George to pop up in front of him.

Except, George didn’t.

He came up behind Dream, who only realized at the last moment. He threw himself back against the trunk, narrowly avoiding decapitation. George swung the axe back, lodging it half way into the tree, the long wooden handle pressed so close to Dream’s throat he could feel it against his skin when he inhaled.

Georgie had been “noisy” on purpose, Dream realized, feeling an odd swell of delight. He hadn’t expected something so clever, but George had moved loudly up then silently across, leaving Dream facing the wrong way. It was a simple trick, but he’d fallen for it nonetheless.

George leaned in towards Dream, pressing the axe closer. The blade was a few centimeters away from Dream, and the handle against his throat felt like a threat, or maybe a taunt. George held the axe with one hand, the other pressed against the trunk behind Dream, effectively pinning him in place. “Are you scared of me, Dreamy?” he teased. His voice was barely above a whisper, and there was mischief gleaming in his eyes.

In a way, the answer was yes. Because Dream was completely and /hopelessly/ in love with

George. And that was fucking terrifying. “Hard to be scared of someone as short as you,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Maybe you should go fight with someone your own size. Like a six year old.”

“At least I’m not as tall as an enderman,” George said, grinning and leaning in even closer. If he was trying to be intimidating, it was working for all the wrong reasons. God, Dream could not handle being this close to George. He wasn’t sure if it was the giant axe or the tiny space between them, but something was making Dream’s heart pound wildly.

George was somehow even more beautiful up close. The gentle angle of his cheekbones made him look so soft. Dream felt the sudden urge to brush his thumb across George’s cheek, curious if it could feel as soft as it looked. He found his eyes tracing down along George’s cheekbone, his attention coming to rest on George’s lips. God, how was he supposed to look away? If it weren’t for the axe shaft against his throat, Dream could so easily lean forward, closing the space between them and pressing his lips against George’s.

“I’ll give you fifty bucks if you let me go this time,” Dream joked, desperate for the sense of normalcy that their dumb banter brought him. He couldn’t think about how close they were, how painfully tempted he was to close that last distance. This stupid game was supposed to distract him from all these complications, not make him want George even more.

“Fifty?” George said, tipping his head to the side and smiling. “Wow. That’s nothing. Come on Dream, don’t you think your life is worth a little more than that?” he joked, even though he clearly had no intention of letting Dream go for anything.

Dream faked a pout, cocking his head to the side. “Alright then. How about... you let me go, and I give you a lesson in archery?” He paused, unable to keep his face from splitting into a grin. “Oh, that already happened. Guess that means I get to leave.” He grabbed the other side of George’s axe, and kicked off the tree. The blade of the axe dislodged as Dream slammed into George, tackling him off the branch, out of the tree.

The fall hurt like a bitch, waking up every single bruise Dream had picked up the night before. But it did the trick. In the brief moment that George was stunned from the impact, Dream took off running, cutting west and disappearing back into the treeline. He ran as hard as he could, and didn’t so much as slow down until he was sure he wasn’t being followed.

That was close, in more ways than one. Sure, Dream had very nearly lost the game of manhunt right there, and that would have sucked. But he'd also been so close to giving himself away, almost letting his stupid wandering eyes reveal how impossible it felt to look at anything but George. And what if George did find out? What then?

He couldn't afford to find out. Dream already knew George wasn't meant for him. Dream had a soulmate, no matter how messy things were. George had a soulmate too, one that he seemed eager to someday meet. Even if George felt the same, it wasn't possible for there to be anything between them. That was the simple, painful truth, and it was the reason why he couldn't confess. It was fine this way. It would be better for George to not have to worry about Dream's stupid feelings.

And as for Dream, well. He was used to being alone anyway.

Chapter End Notes

tbh i'm really struggling with motivation rn. i have a few already written chapters left, but it's hard to find the energy to keep goin :(i'm gonna try and stick to it tho!!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Dream visits the Nether. Some things aren't meant to be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was dusk by the time Dream reached the base of the mountains, but the darkness made it easier to spot the glow of lava vents. The first pool of lava he found was a short ways into a cave. It was only barely below the surface, but there was still enough room to work. There was even just enough iron for Dream to craft a chestplate and a pair of boots, so at least he wouldn't be travelling to the hellish fire dimension with no protection.

With his bucket handy, he got to work shaping the lava into an obsidian frame. Working with lava could be risky business, but Dream had made the trip to the Nether enough times that he had the motions of setting up a portal locked in muscle memory. He didn't light the portal right away though, figuring he still had a few quick things he wanted to get done in the overworld.

For one thing, he'd eaten through the last of his rabbit meat for dinner, and food was dangerous to come by in the Nether, so he spent an hour or two hunting and scavenging the nearby area until he figured he had enough to last him a few days. (Hopefully, he wouldn't have to stay in the Nether that long, though.) He also spent time gathering some basic supplies, like spare wood for crafting and fresh water for his canteen. He was even lucky enough to find and fight an enderman. The one pearl it had dropped wasn't going to be enough, but it was definitely a step in the right direction.

Once Dream was fairly certain he was ready, he threw sticks and long grass over the shallow cave entrance. It wasn't much in the way of camouflage, but it might at least slow the hunters down. Besides, with Sapnap respawning back at the village, the hunter team would need time to rest and regroup. If Dream pulled a late-nighter, he could probably get into the Nether, grab what he needed, then get back to the overworld before they ever even found his portal.

Dream pulled out his flint and steel, striking it in the center of the obsidian frame. The sparks from the flint shimmered, expanding as their color shifted from orange to purple, spiraling out into misty firelight until they filled the frame with the familiar glimmering mist, glimpses of a fiery plane visible through the lavender smoke.

Stepping into the cold flames was always nauseating, like being swung around by his feet, as the world practically flipped the other way around. Even though he'd made the trip plenty of times before, it still took him a moment to gather his bearings when he was dragged through space into another reality.

It wasn't the worst place to come out in the Nether, but it definitely wasn't the best either. It looked to be one of the crimson forests. The tall red fungus trees loomed overhead, their caps almost obscuring the stone ceiling far above. He could faintly hear the sound of hoglins nearby, their tusks scraping back stone, probably digging for edible mushrooms or roots. Although Dream was fairly sure he could take on the rather large beasts, it would best to avoid them. If he wore himself out by fighting now, he wouldn't have the energy he needed to hunt blazes once he found a fortress.

Though, from the looks of things, that might take a while. There were no fortress walls in any direction for as far as Dream could see. He checked the coordinates on his phone, picked a direction that he hoped looked promising, and started hiking off into the nether.

It was hard to judge distances in the Nether. Aside from the heavy red fog, almost every potential path cut back and forth erratically, diving into narrow ravines and up steep cliff sides. Still, it seemed like Dream had been walking for at least three or so miles when he felt the now-familiar tapping of letters against his palm.

'Hi. Feeling better?'

"You don't need to check in on me."

'I want to. So do you feel better or not?.'

Despite his trepidation, Dream couldn't help but smile. He hadn't really expected his soulmate to follow up on the incident from the night before, but it was... sweet.

"Still sore as fuck. But ok."

'Take things slow. When I say be safe, I mean it, dumbass.'

"Romantic."

'What's your name?'

Fuck. Dream felt his skin burn even hotter against the steaming Nether air. His hands felt shaky. He stopped walking for a moment, not sure if he could reply without walking off a cliff. It was such a simple question. But it would make everything so real. Even if they weren't going to hate him at the drop of a hat, Dream wasn't ready to meet his soulmate. He couldn't put himself out there, not yet.

"I'm not ready to tell you."

'Why not?'

"I just don't want to."

'Why not though?'

"I just don't want to, shut up."

Alright, that was probably a little harsh. Dream was lashing out, taking his frustration and pent up bitterness out on someone who just wanted to meet their soulmate. Even if it *was* harsh, he didn't feel like apologizing. He didn't ask for a soulmate, didn't ask to be responsible for the feelings of someone else.

'Nice job Romeo.'

"Didn't I say to shut up?"

'No you.'

Alright, so maybe they didn't take it too harshly after all. Dream sat down on a fallen red log, grinning and shaking his head. When he was a kid, he'd always imagined his soulmate would be some stupid judgmental prick. While they certainly did seem to be stupid, otherwise they were nothing like he expected. They were fun, and caring, and annoying in a way that would be cute if the circumstances were different. He couldn't help but smile when another message was scratched into his hand.

'What're you up to?'

"Quick trip into the Nether, gotta grab some stuff."

'Oh! You mentioned you're an adventurer.'

"Yeah. Less boring than farming or some shit."

'What if I told you I was a farmer?'

"I would say you're boring."

'Just so you know if you fall in lava I'll never forgive you.'

"I wasn't planning on it."

'Yeah, sure.'

"What's that supposed to mean?"

'Nothing.'

"Nothing my ass. What more do you want from me?"

'Well if you're offering, how about a souvenir from your Nether trip?'

'Oh joy, so you're the needy type. What, do you want me to be your sugar daddy too?'

"Yes. Shower me in diamonds and flowers, lol."

Dream glanced up, realizing at some point he'd stopped walking to focus on the conversation. His face burned red with embarrassment, and he quickly got back to his feet, picking up his pace now. He hadn't meant to get so caught up in dumb banter like that. It had been so easy, so comfortable, so much like the playful teasing between him and his friends. It was nice. Maybe, even if their first impressions were going to be rough, he could convince his soulmate to look past that, and the two of them could at the least be friends.

Once he remembered he was supposed to be doing something other than chatting up his soulmate, he quickly started moving again. His soulmate still traced out the occasional off-handed comment or observation, cracking jokes and keeping Dream company in an odd sort of distant way. Notably, his soulmate didn't ask anymore questions, and Dream felt quietly thankful for that.

It was roughly another hour of walking before Dream finally found a fortress. The abandoned dark castle seemed to bear a red glint in the glow of the sea of lava beneath it. There was no entrance near the ground, most of the netherrack bridges leading to crumbling cliffs far above. The huge dark pillars that held the castle aloft had no entrances either, but despite that, they were probably the best way into the fortress. Although there were more handholds in the decaying brick than there had been in the ravine, Dream still felt his stomach twist. It was a long climb up. If he fell this time, the manhunt would be over for sure.

After taking a few minutes to steel his nerves, Dream started climbing up. He moved more slowly than usual, picking each handhold with caution instead of practically throwing himself from grip to grip. His muscles still ached from the fall the day before. The idea of repeating that was pretty nauseating. Eventually, he did make it up the side of the pillar, dragging himself onto one of the many bridges that crisscrossed throughout the nether fortress.

Although it would probably be past sunset in the overworld, Dream was used to staying up late, and sleeping in the Nether was unusually dangerous anyway. After chasing off any of the withered skeletons that shambled too close, he started following the walls of the fortress, looking for one of the strange cages that caused blazes to spawn.

As he explored, he came across one of the dimly lit rooms that seemed to have once been some kind of farm, with small red bulbs of nether wart growing in neat rows of cursed soil. It occurred to him that if he did have a bit of a lead on the hunters at the moment, he should be taking advantage of it.

The roots of the nether wart had grown fairly deep from years of growing uncut, so rather than try and dig them up, he angled his axe, using the blade to hack off several handfuls. He put it in one of the side pockets of his backpack, then returned to his search through the winding ruined halls.

Dream found what he was looking for in a part of the fortress half-submerged in a netherrack cliff. At the end of a long winding hallway, worn with the footsteps of people long since dead, a small cave held one of the spawner cages. The fire within flickered when Dream came near, the embers lashing at the cage bars reproachfully. A few stray sparks escaped the fire. Most flickered out, quickly dying without the fire's heat.

Three of the sparks grew brighter, gray smoke billowing outwards as each spark took the shape of a blaze. The floating creatures spoke in raspy groans, each of them turning to look at Dream with yellowed burnt eyes, their bodies glowing with heat.

Dream quickly lifted his shield as the blazes each began firing on him, taking a few steps back. Compared to some of the other beasts that called the Nether home, blazes were relatively fragile. With a shield and an axe, they were fairly easy to dispatch, but that was no reason to be careless. Even a single well-aimed blast of fire could lead to hellish burns.

Thankfully, the cave that surrounded this particular spawn cage kept the blazes from flying off and firing on Dream from a distance. He moved quickly, slamming shield-first into the nearest blaze to disorient it. He landed two decisive axe swings and felled the mob, just in time to shield himself from the next bout of flame from the two still standing.

He moved in on the two remaining blaze, carefully timing his blocks and his axe strikes, keeping in step with his target so they couldn't come nearer to him, but wouldn't escape his reach. He brought his axe in a violent upward swing, through the circling molten rods and into the bottom of the creature's head. The mouthless creature let out a scratchy dying moan before falling to the

ground.

That left Dream in the cave with one more blaze, though there was no telling when more might spawn. He deflected the creature's volley of fire, wincing at the heat, hot enough to feel even though the protection of his shield. The moment the fire subsided, he lunged forward, smashing his axe into the monster with enough force to knock it across the room.

There was a moment, however brief, that the spawn cage fell quiet. The corpses of the defeated blazes blackened and flaked away like burning paper, only a few of their glowing molten rods remaining. Dream wrapped his hand in a piece of rabbit hide so he wouldn't burn himself, then started collecting the quickly cooling blaze rods. He'd have to crush them down into a fine powder if they were going to be any use, but that would have to wait. It wasn't safe to do that here.

Dream fell into the familiar rhythm of waiting at the side of the spawn cage, then striking down each blaze to take form, wincing each time the flames came a bit too close for comfort. It didn't take long to gather more than enough blaze rods. It went well, for the most part. There was a close call when a wither skeleton almost caught Dream unaware, but he managed to avoid catching the strange black decay that wracked their bodies, and quickly dispatched the threat.

He was collecting his thirteenth fallen blaze rod now, wiping sweat away from his forehead. He wouldn't need nearly so many, but if he was going to take advantage of his lead and make potions, the extras would come in handy. So caught up with his internal debate on which potions to brew, Dream's grip on the rabbit hide slipped, burning his hand on the blaze rod.

Hissing in pain, he flinched back, struggling for a moment to slow his heartbeat. It was like touching a stove that had only just been turned off. The red burns throbbed unpleasantly. "Fuck," Dream muttered. If he were in the overworld, he could ease the burns in a river or a cold pond, but water and the Nether didn't really mix. He'd just have to try and ignore the stinging pain until he got back out. He grabbed the blaze rod more carefully this time, adding it to his backpack before turning and running to get as much distance between him and the spawner as possible.

Dream felt a gentle touch against his hand, the faint sensation of someone taking hold of it carefully. He instinctively flinched when his soulmate's touch grazed his burned fingers, although the contact didn't really cause any pain. He could feel his soulmate's fingers intertwining with his, as if he were holding his hands together. There was a pause, a sort of silent hesitancy, as if waiting for some sign to stop. And then, something soft pressed against Dream's knuckles.

Somehow, the contact was even more delicate, faintly warm and incredibly light in touch. It took a moment for Dream to place the feeling, his heart missing a beat. A kiss, cautiously pressed against his knuckles. It was like the way someone would kiss a child's injury to "fix" it, a touch filled with gentle care and concern. Soft. Sweet. Affectionate.

Dream found a desolate corner of the fortress, slumping down, fighting off the pounding in his chest. Without thinking, he traced his fingers over where he had felt the brief kiss. His stomach dropped, and for a moment, Dream felt breathless.

He couldn't accept affection, not from his soulmate. Not after years of feeling like a freak for how they would inevitably think of him. Not after falling in love with George. It wasn't /fair./ His soulmate was never going to love him. At least, not once they met him. And even if they did, even if they were the most kind and beautiful person in the world and they loved him more than life itself, what would it matter? Even if there was no chance of moving forward, no chance of requittal, he loved George. He /loved/ George. It wasn't something he could just set down and leave behind because it was inconvenient or painful to admit.

It was easier when he thought his soulmate hated him, because then he could just hate them right back. But they were making it hard, impossible even, to just blindly hate them. Guilt and anger burned in his stomach, warring over whether they were to blame or if it was all his own fault. He couldn't say nothing. After all, if this damned situation wasn't fair for Dream, it was a million times more unfair for his soulmate.

Soulmates were supposed to be this amazing thing, a gift from the universe itself that promised love and happiness. But Dream could not fill that promise.

With shaking hands, Dream scratched the letters into his palm, more aggressively than was really necessary.

"Don't do that."

The answer was quick and clumsy, and the one simple word seemed heavy with guilt.

'Sorry.'

There was a long pause, no further messages and no idea from Dream what else he could say. Eventually, his soulmate 'spoke' again.

'Are your burns ok?'

"I don't want to talk about it."

'I'm worried about you.'

"Stop."

'Did I do something wrong?'

"I never asked for a soulmate. Leave me alone."

Dream waited for a reply, waited for the comforting sensation of writing on his palm, but the seconds ticked by unresponsively. He could feel waves of resentment and guilt lashing at the walls he kept up, threatening to break in, to tear him down. Even though he held fast, fighting off the pain that waited for him, nothing could stop the hollow heaviness that bore down on him. It was

like falling, a brief weightlessness followed by a painful stillness.

He sat down, pulling his knees close to his chest, pressing his head against them and curling up defensively. His face felt hot beneath the mask. Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks, warm and sticky between the mask and his skin. (He told himself it was just sweat. The Nether was hot, it was just sweat, he was *fine*, he had to keep telling himself that.)

Dream would not admit how long he stayed there, fighting to keep his breath even, squeezing his eyes shut to try and hold it all inside. He would not admit how many times he considered writing back to his soulmate, begging them for forgiveness. He would not admit it, but for once, Dream felt like he deserved the word branded on his wrist.

Chapter End Notes

haha, pain :)

also! i'm working on some more fics! i've already posted a few drabbles, with more on the way, but i also have plans for another multi chapter dnf fic! so consider following me for when that comes out ^^ (i /might/ also do a mini companion fic to this of george's pov later if i feel up to it)

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Dream's friends offer him comfort. An indirect kiss is shared.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The journey back to the overworld was painfully uneventful, leaving Dream alone with the weight of his own thoughts. The closest he came to a distraction was a brief run in with an enderman, but the fight was short, and it didn't drop an ender pearl, all too soon forcing Dream to return to the silent confrontation with his guilt.

There was no sign of tampering with his portal, and when he passed back through, it was clear that the cave where he'd built it hadn't been found. The sticks and grass strewn across the entrance did little to hide the pitch black of the night sky, or the distant sound of mournful crickets. Unless the hunters were going through the night, they wouldn't be finding him soon.

At the very least the return to the overworld gave Dream busywork to occupy himself with. If his mind couldn't keep busy, his hands would.

But there was no challenge in clearing a space to sleep. He had the crafting of a brewing station down to muscle memory. Preparing potion ingredients was simple enough, though at least the work of powdering and cutting and mixing ingredients gave him something to do, however small. He put considerably more effort into crushing the blaze rods than necessary, smashing them with a rock, going a while even after they were powdered. It was a small, stupid act of anger, like screaming into the void, and it brought no satisfaction or relief.

Once he had the potions of strength simmering on the brewing stand, the only thing left to do was to eat dinner, and really, Dream didn't feel hungry. He sat down against the cave wall, hugging his knees to his chest, holding his head in his hands.

Dream had put up with years of envy, of frustration, of guilt, all because he thought his soulmate could never love him. Then he found out they did, and he threw it back in their face. He should

never have said anything, just blindly putting his trust in fate like everyone else. Maybe he would've fallen in love with them. Maybe he'd have stopped loving George.

That was a stupid idea. As if fate could change the way Dream felt. Hell, *Dream* couldn't even change the way he felt.

All he wanted was to scream, to punch the cave walls until his knuckles bled, but he couldn't even find the energy to stand up. He knew for sure that he didn't want to talk about it. Talking through his problems was something Dream had never been comfortable with, especially on the subject of soulmates. But even if he didn't want to talk, he didn't want to be alone. It wasn't a solution Dream needed, he decided as he pulled out his phone; it was just to know that he wasn't totally alone.

Dream: You guys still up?

Badboyhalo: Probably not for long, because Sapnap's tuckered out! He ran really hard to get back :3

Sapnap: Dude, I'm not that tired

Dream: Neat

God, he sounded so dumb. Ordinarily, Dream didn't have much trouble keeping his cards close to his chest, but he was so tired everything came out feeling fake and flat. He couldn't even pretend to carry a conversation. Pathetic. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against his knees, taking a deep breath in and holding himself close.

Dream: Get some good sleep ig

Sapnap: Alright, what's fucking with you man

Badboyhalo: Language! But he's right, are you okay Dream?

Dream: I'm fine

Sapnap: Bullshit.

Badboyhalo: Sapnap, I can't monitor your language and help Dream at the same time, so I'll let it go for now but please don't take my silence as encouragement :/

Badboyhalo: Come on Dream, you can tell us what's wrong, we're your friends!

Dream: It's just old stuff bugging me. Feeling like a creep

Sapnap: Do you need to talk about it?

Badboyhalo: What do you mean, feeling like a creep? You aren't a creep!

Dream: My soulmate would disagree with you on that.

No one replied for a while. That wasn't surprising. Bad hadn't known, and being the sweet ball of

sunshine he was, it probably had never occurred to him that someone could hate their soulmate. As for Sapnap, he wasn't used to Dream talking about his soulmark so openly. The chatroom fell silent for a while, the same echoing stillness that rang in Dream's head.

George: You know what, soulmates are fucking overrated anyway, you aren't missing out on much

Badboyhalo: Dream!! I'm so sorry, I had no idea. Anyone would be lucky to have you as a soulmate, and someone too silly to see how great you are doesn't deserve you anyway <:c

Dream: It's seriously not a big deal. It's kind of dumb, actually

Sapnap: The only dumb one is your soulmate, man.

George: #cancelsoulmates

Badboyhalo: I'm so glad you told us. We'll do whatever we can to help out, okay? When manhunt is over, we can watch movies and eat pizza til we're sick :)

Sapnap: The only good solution to this

George: God, yes

George: You know what? If this whole fucking soulmate shit didn't exist I'd probably be dating one of you guys right now

Badboyhalo: Awww that's cute :D

George: Except for Sapnap because he's a bitch

Sapnap: You want to say that to my face?

George: On my way

Dream waited for anyone to speak, but the chat had fallen silent again. This time, though, the silence didn't weigh quite so heavily.

Dream: Hello?? What happened?

Badboyhalo: Sorry, George and Sapnap started fighting :/

Dream: Send a vid I wanna see

Badboyhalo: Dream?

Dream: Uh. Yeah?

Badboyhalo: I just want you to know, it's okay to not be okay.

Badboyhalo: You don't have to pretend with us. You're our friend, and we want to be there for you. Not just when you're happy and celebrating, but when you're sad, or angry, or scared. We all want to support you, through the good and the bad. I know it's scary. I've been through some really hard stuff too, and even though I don't completely understand what you're going through, I know how it feels to try and keep everything bottled up. But we do want to be here for you. For better or worse.

Badboyhalo: Well! I guess I shouldn't speak for the others, but I know I do, and I'm pretty sure they do too. :)

Dream: Thanks, Bad

Badboyhalo: You're welcome! Now, what can we do to make you feel good? owo

Dream: I dunno. I don't want to stop the game of manhunt, but I also really want to be with you guys right now. Being alone and feeling shitty suck together

Badboyhalo: Hmmm

Badboyhalo: Oh! I've got it! :D We can have a sleepover on video chat! That way we can all see each other and talk and hang out, but we won't have to meet up and end the game! Let me go break up Sap and Georgie's fight so we can set up the vc ^-^

It wasn't long before the chat screen lit up with a request for a video call. If none of this had happened, Dream would hang up to keep the hunters from catching any clues about where he was. But to be honest, at the moment Dream didn't really care if it gave any hints away. All he wanted was to see his friends and forget about the things he'd said and done. So he propped his phone up on his knees and accepted the call.

Everyone was quick to join the call, and Dream couldn't help but smile when faced with three of his closest friends. Although it was hard to tell in the low light, it seemed the three hunters had been setting up camp in a small clearing, their faces lit by a campfire just out of the cameras' sight.

"Dream!" Sapnap shouted, breaking into a huge grin. "Is that a nether portal behind you? Holy shit man, I thought you'd still be mining for stuff. Don't tell me you've already been to a fortress!"

And although Dream really was grateful for Bad's words of support, *this* was so much better. Forgetting, just for a few minutes, about mistakes and arguments and wrong choices made. Just being with his friends and talking about something stupid. "What did you expect? I'm the king of manhunt," Dream boasted. "I've basically already won."

"King of modesty too," George joked, rolling his eyes. Dream couldn't help but notice that George looked so /soft/ in the firelight. His hair was mussed about by the goggles pushed back on his head, falling into loose messy curls. His expression was so distant and deep, as though his mind were far far away. It seemed as though he were thinking about something. But then, George was always thinking. Not always about the task at hand, or whatever he was supposed to be doing, but *thinking* nonetheless. But he kept it all close to the chest, and Dream found himself always wanting to know what was on the other man's mind.

Dream wheezed faintly, still not quite feeling up to actual laughter. "Why should I be modest? You guys literally had me surrounded, in a tree, three against one, and I still got away. If I was being modest, I'd be lying."

Sapnap groaned, rubbing the side of his head where he'd been hit by the axe. Pain didn't usually follow after death, but even the memory of such a nasty injury was probably unpleasant to think about. "Dude, you're like a cockroach. You just won't die."

"Oh!" Bad bit his lip, his eyes lighting up. "That reminds me, Dream, I actually had a question about manhunt. There aren't any rules about the kinds of weapons we can use, right?"

Dream tilted his head to the side, nodding slowly, curious as to what Bad had in mind. "Yeah. Only rule is that I have to kill a dragon before you guys kill me. Traps, weapons, potions, anything goes."

Bad looked like a kid on Christmas, practically beaming with delight. “So that means it’s okay if I make throwing knives! Right?”

“Throwing knives?” George echoed, snapping out of his reverie. “I don’t think any of us could really use something like that without a lot of practice. Let’s save our iron.”

Bad laughed, shaking his head. “It’s okay! I already practice all the time, and I have really good aim! I don’t have as much practice as I’d like with moving targets, but I’m pretty sure I could land some good hits.”

For a moment, the call fell quiet.

But then the moment passed, and they erupted into chaos.

“Holy shit, Bad, you throw knives? Why didn’t you say so! Dude, that’s so badass!” Sapnap crowed, his camera lurching as he leaned over to throw an arm around Bad’s shoulder.

“Softboyhalo is a lie,” Dream said, feigning a dramatic gasp of betrayal. “It’s like we don’t even know you.”

“C’mon, Bad,” George added. “You can’t just say that and not show us!”

Bad became a flustered mess of blushing, shaking his head fervently. “Knife throwing is a totally normal sport, I don’t know why you’re making a big deal out of this!” he sputtered. “Besides, I haven’t practiced in a few weeks, not since Skeppy--” he stopped suddenly, clasping his hands over his mouth. “Shoot! I’m so sorry,” he said quickly. “I didn’t mean to bring up soulmates, it just kind of slipped out. We can talk about something else.”

There was a pause, and Dream got the distinct feeling they were all waiting for him to say something. He thought it over for a moment, then shook his head. "Nah, it's fine. Keep talking." Despite himself, a small smile crossed his face. "Actually, spare no details. Since George cancelled soulmates, it's our sworn duty as your friends to make sure this 'Skeppy' guy actually deserves you and isn't secretly some dumbass jerk."

Bad hesitated, meeting Dream's eyes. "Are you sure?" Dream nodded, and Bad seemed to relax slightly. "Well, Skeppy isn't secretly a jerk. Actually, he's pretty openly a jerk," Bad said, a small giggle slipping through. "When he came to town, he kept pulling pranks and teasing me and calling me bald, and he was just the most annoying person I'd ever met! So I started trying to troll him back. But then he started making fun of me for that, saying my trolls weren't any good, and it kind of spun out of control into this whole prank feud. It was pretty silly."

Bad softened, his expression filling with warmth, smiling with what could only be described as fond annoyance. "But then, we started hanging out more. I don't really know how to describe it, but at some point all of the trolls stopped being as important as just having an excuse to spend time with each other. Despite all the teasing, he never did any trolls that would actually hurt me, and he was always really supportive and nice. He made every day fun and exciting. I think I kinda fell in love with him before I knew we were soulmates."

Sapnap, scratched his chin, frowning. "Wait, so what does this have to do with you throwing knives?"

Bad's blush came back with a vengeance, burying his face in his hands. "Well, okay, so one day he came over to hang out without telling me. And I was outside throwing knives. Then all of a sudden, with no regards for safety, Skeppy comes running out into the throwing range to say hi, like an absolute muffinhead! I'd already let go of the knife I was throwing, and he just ran right into it! Just a big old knife, lodged in his shoulder. We were both so startled! He started panic laughing, and that made me laugh, but then he passed out from blood loss, and we've been dating ever since then."

George shook his head in disbelief. "Well, it sounds like your soulmate isn't a total dick. He's just... weird as hell. Congratulations, I think?"

Bad laughed, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Thank you. It was definitely a weird way to find out! I hope you guys can meet Skeppy one day. I think you’d like him a lot.”

The conversation drifted from soulmates back to Bad’s knife throwing, then to the topic of manhunt and camping, then to sleepovers and campouts they’d gone on when they were young. There was an aimless wandering sort of nature to the conversation, and the distinct feeling that the words didn’t matter nearly so much as the fact that they were together.

Eventually the conversation began to die down, but none of them were tired yet--or if they were, they were hiding it so the night could continue. In the quiet moments, Dream found his eyes drifting again and again to George’s camera. He seemed unusually reserved, contemplative. It made Dream wish that they’d met so much sooner, that he could know George well enough to read his expressions like a book. Was it concern for Dream? Was it some worry he kept to himself? Or did George always seem so distant late at night?

Although Dream was fine just enjoying the presence of his friends, knowing they were there for him no matter how far away, he was admittedly curious when Sapnap suggested they play some party games.

Truth or dare sounded dumb, and two truths and a lie seemed too easy (although Bad pointed out they’d had no idea he threw knives for fun, so maybe it wasn’t *that* easy.) Eventually, the idea of spin-the-bottle came up. It was a stupid suggestion, only mentioned as a joke, which was probably why they ended up doing it. After all, backing down meant you were too much of a coward to give your homies a little kiss goodnight, and no one would admit to that.

Jokes did have a way of spiraling out of control like that.

The first few spins were dumb harmless fun; George pretending to gag when he got a kiss from Sapnap, Bad turning a bright shade of pink when George gave him a little kiss, Sapnap laughing like an idiot when he spun the bottle only to land on himself. No one really noticed the issue until George gave the bottle a spin, only for it to end up pointing towards Dream. Or at least, where Dream *would* have been.

Dream stared at his phone for a moment, then split into a grin, unable to fight back a cackle of

laughter. “Oh my god,” he said. “Oh my god, we are /so/ fucking stupid,” he wheezed, grabbing the front of his mask to keep it from slipping off in his laughing fit. “Spin the bottle! Great idea Sappnap, that’s the perfect game to play. It’s not like we’re video chatting or anything.” He slipped a hand under his mask to wipe away the tears, still laughing. “We must be fucking *exhausted*. How else did we miss something so obvious, holy shit.”

They all broke into laughter over the mistake, jokingly blaming each other for the dumb oversight. When the laughter finally began to die down, Bad was the one who spoke up. “Well, I guess we can’t keep playing then. Should we do something else? Maybe a riddle game?”

George shook his head, pouting. “We can’t change games yet. The bottle landed on Dream. He needs to be kissed, that’s the rules.”

Dream swallowed the dryness in his mouth, grateful no one could see the way his face burned red when George said that. Maybe it was for the better that they couldn’t play spin-the-bottle. He hadn’t really considered what it would mean if he kissed George, even if it was only for the sake of a game. “Good luck kissing me,” he joked. “You don’t even know where I am.”

“We’ll do a video kiss or whatever,” George said dismissively, meeting Dream’s eyes through the camera. Something flickered in George’s expression, something Dream didn’t quite recognize. “What, Dream, don’t tell me you’re scared of a little kiss?”

‘Yes,’ Dream thought, his heart beginning to beat faster. ‘*God yes, I’m terrified.*’ “It’s not a kiss if it’s on video chat, but whatever you say, Georgie,” he said, forcing a laugh.

George just laughed back, oblivious of just how much he was torturing Dream. He smiled, tucking a stray hair beneath the strap of his goggles, leaning close to the camera. “Yeah, you’re right. This is pretty fucking stupid.”

Dream leaned in too, tipping his mask back slightly. He wasn’t acting on thought, every movement powered by instinct, by desire. George was asking him to kiss. Even if it was only for a game, even if there was no meaning behind it, he couldn’t possibly think of how he could say no. His restraint left him in a soft sigh that parted his lips.

For just a moment, they both touched their lips against the screen. It was hard and cold, and Dream could only imagine what it would feel like if George were actually here, if their lips were to actually touch. It only lasted for a second, brief and surface-level like every other kiss in the game had been. Sapnap was joking about how dumb George had looked kissing his phone, and Bad was suggesting games they could play next, but Dream wasn't listening anymore. The only sound he could hear was the blood rushing to his head, a weightless feeling flooding him as though he'd fallen into the sea.

As the night dragged on, one by one the hunters fell asleep, worn out from the day's demanding chase. Although Dream's body felt exhausted too, his mind wouldn't sleep. He felt helpless, completely out of control, and he didn't entirely care.

George was the last to fall asleep among the hunters. He'd never hung up, and even messy and tired as he was, Dream thought he looked beautiful. He seemed to be murmuring to himself, too soft for the phone's mic to pick up, a soft sadness weighing on his expression even in sleep.

"Good night, Georgie," Dream whispered softly. "Love you." He hung up the call, laying back against the floor and staring up at the cave ceiling. His mind was buzzing with a storm of thoughts once again, but this time, he felt ready to face it.

Dream would apologize to his soulmate. Well, not yet. Even if they were still awake, he couldn't quite bring himself to do it tonight. But he would, and soon. They deserved to be happy, and he didn't want to keep them from that. More than ever, though, Dream knew he'd been right. He could never love anyone the way that he loved George. Not destiny, not fate, not the very designs of the soul could convince him otherwise. He would explain everything to his soulmate and ask for their forgiveness. And then...

God, what then? The idea of telling George still seemed impossible. Even if soulmates had nothing to do with it, could George ever really think of Dream like that? Things would be completely, irrevocably different if he confessed, for better or for worse.

Tomorrow. Dream would decide what to do tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

hope you all enjoyed the holidays! i've got rough drafts of the next few chapters, and we're getting close to the end! it'll probably be thirteen or fourteen chapters in total. i'm still planning on doing a george's pov companion fic, but i'll probably write something else between this and that to give my brain a break.

i'm trying to decide what to write for my next fic! i have three ideas i've been playing with, and i thought it could be fun to let you guys vote! pick your fav on the strawpoll, and i'll write that one next ^-^

<https://www.strawpoll.me/42352030>

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The game resumes. Dream apologizes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream woke up incredibly sore, but that was probably to be expected when you fell asleep in a cold rocky cave. It took him a few minutes to get up and stretch, trying to warm his stiff muscles, puffing a few breaths of hot air into his cupped hands. Outside of the cave, the skies were weighed down with thick gray clouds holding the world hostage with threat of snow. It was past dawn, but not by long. There was no way of knowing when the hunters would resume their search, and Dream had been in one place for too long. It was time to get moving again.

First, though, he had some things he needed to get done. Sometime the night before, the potions had finished brewing. Dream inspected each of the three bottles, swishing them around to check for any flaws. The cloudy stale water had become thick and viscous, shifting to an almost opaque fuchsia glow. Flecks of golden blaze powder swirled through the potion. Each glass bottle was warm to the touch, smelling faintly of smoke and sulphur. They were definitely serviceable for potions brewed up on the run. Dream tied each strength potion to his belt, where they'd be on hand the moment he needed them.

After a bit of looking around, he found the leftover blaze powder from the night before, ground down into a coarse flaming-gold dust. Dream dug around in his bag, grabbing the lone ender pearl he'd already found. He rolled it in the blaze powder, the surface hissing and bubbling slightly as the pearl's outer shell dissolved. The golden powder clung to the transforming pearl, slowly shifting the dark bluish hue into a shimmering translucent green, a streak of black now visible in the core. No one was really sure why these transformed pearls, these "Eyes of Ender," held the ability to locate and power portals to The End. But that was a question for historians and scholars to worry about. Dream was more interested in exploring the places they unlocked.

With the Eye of Ender in one hand, Dream climbed out of the cave. He kept to the base of the mountain, walking through the bare trees and scraggly underbrush, ready to begin a hunt of his own. There wouldn't be any more endermen spawning on the surface until sunset, so for now, he would have to focus on finding the stronghold. There was nothing else to be done.

Almost nothing. He *had* promised to apologize to his soulmate for being a dick. But when he thought about reaching out to them, about writing on his skin, anxiety clawed at his stomach. He would apologize. He would. Just... not yet.

Desperate for a distraction, Dream pulled out his phone. To his surprise and relief, there were already a few messages.

Badboyhalo: Good morning Muffintees and Dream! It's day three of manhunt. Please remember to drink plenty of water so you don't get dehydrated while you run!

Sapnap: Gotta take care of your health during the Murder Game

Badboyhalo: Yes owo

Dream: Good morning to you guys too

Badboyhalo: Dream! How do you feel after last night?

Dream: Pretty good, it was fun

Sapnap: Oh I *bet* you had fun, didn't you ;)

Dream: Oh my god, shut up

Sapnap: I bet you had soooo much fun playing spin the bottle

Badboyhalo: I'm glad you had a good time, Dream!

George: Sapnap are you making fun of Dream without me? Rude.

Dream: Et tu, Georgie?

George: Perish

God, his friends were such dorks. Hesitantly, Dream took his eyes off the conversation, focusing his attention on the small green eye in his hand. Taking a few steps back, Dream lifted the Eye of Ender towards the sky.

It vibrated in his hand, like a trapped bird beating its wings, frantically trying to fly free. He loosened his grip, and immediately it shot out from his fingers, soaring up into the sky. It flew through the air a few hundred yards before its arc began to curve back down, landing in the grass. Dream sprinted over to where it fell, relieved it didn't shatter on the first impact. He picked it up, letting it soar through the air again, guiding him stretch by stretch towards the nearest stronghold ruins.

The strange ruins were fairly common. In fact, there were a lot of ruins in the overworld, everything from collapsed portals to huge flooded palaces. Where they'd come from was a mystery that had been lost to time. But there was good money to be made exploring them, and there were always people willing to pay for treasures or historical artifacts. It was dangerous, but Dream had always preferred danger over boredom, so being an adventurer had been the perfect job for him. As for the strongholds, there was generally one every twenty to fifty miles, if you knew how to find it. They weren't the most profitable ruins to explore, since there were often more monsters than treasure, and the libraries were typically so rotted with mildew and mold that even the most fanatic historians wouldn't pay for books to be retrieved from there.

But these "strongholds" did have one unique feature; intricately-carved seemingly-indestructible

frames, that once powered, became portals to The End. No one had ever been able to replicate, move, or destroy any of these frames. Strange as they were, they were the *only* passage to The End. So naturally, since visiting The End was crucial to the goal, games of manhunt always led through a stronghold.

While following the Eye of Ender southwest, trying not to lose it in the long grass and dense trees, another message came into the group chat. Dream pulled his phone out to take a quick glance, and felt his heart begin to race.

It was a selfie by Sapnap, with George and Bad squeezed in. They were all in full iron, grinning at the camera. Bad had at least a dozen sharpened knives strapped all over his belt, and both Sapnap and George were clutching diamond axes. All three of them were grinning at the camera as confidently as if they'd already won.

Despite the fact that the photo was clearly a taunt, a show of power on the part of the hunters, fear wasn't the first thing on Dream's mind. Instead, his first thought was '*Damn, George looks good in armor.*' His second thought was '*Fuck.*'

Sapnap: I hope you're ready Dreammmmm

Dream: Is that supposed to scare me?

George: You should be more scared about the fact that we're right behind you.

Dream immediately lunged behind a tree, dropping low. He peered out cautiously, his heart rate spiking, eyes darting about frantically. He waited. No sight of them. No sound of movement through the underbrush. Nothing.

George: You totally looked around didn't you?

Dream: No I didn't

George: Admit it, you believed me!

Dream: Shut up I didn't

Badboyhalo: We don't need to be there right now. We're getting stacked, and as soon as we find you, you're going to be totally muffined! >:3

Sapnap: Besides, we look dope as hell

Badboyhalo: Language!

Sapnap: What do you think, Dream? I mean, I always look great, and Bad literally can't be anything but adorable. But George, how's he looking in his armor? Think he looks good?

Goddammit. Dream decided Sapnap retroactively deserved the axe to the head. The two of them had always teased each other, but why about George, why now? His face burned with embarrassment, remembering the conversation they'd had before the game of manhunt began. Was Sapnap trying to get Dream to confess?

Some days, having a best friend felt really overrated.

George: Sapnap, literally what are you talking about.

Sapnap: I'm just asking for the man's opinion is all

Badboyhalo: If it means anything, I think you look very nice George! :)

Dream: Yeah, you look cute

Fuck shit dammit it didn't sound enough like a joke. He wasn't ready to admit it, not yet, hell, maybe not *ever*. It would look even weirder if he deleted the message, though. Quickly, he sent another.

Dream: Too bad I don't date short guys

George: Ha ha ha, very funny. I'm sure one day you'll find a lovely giraffe to settle down with.

Dream: Well if you're looking for a date I know a garden gnome who'd be perfect for you

George: Consider me interested, lol.

Badboyhalo: You two muffinheads really need help. :\

Sapnap: God, I know right?

George: HEY!

Dream: Lmao I mean probably

It was long past sunset when the Eye of Ender finally began drifting straight up, having at last reached the nearest stronghold. Dream's legs were sore from walking, so he was quick to find a small copse of trees and set up camp for the night, ready to rest. He'd probably stay up a few hours longer, patrolling the area for any endermen or early hunters.

First, though, he *did* still have an apology to make. He'd been putting it off for hours, finding new excuses despite the uneventfulness of the day, finding any flimsy reason to wait a while longer.

If he didn't do it tonight, he'd probably keep putting it off for the rest of his life. It was just that Dream didn't entirely know *how* to apologize. Obviously "sorry" was the first place to start, but what then? Tell his soulmate he was in love with someone else? Ask if they wanted to be friends even though he'd been a complete asshole to them? Tell them he'd spent his whole life scared they would hate him, and now he'd made his own fears come true?

For now, he just carefully, hesitantly wrote one word on his palm.

"Hi."

The wait was only a few seconds, but it felt like hours. Were they already asleep? Or were they ignoring him on purpose, too hurt or angry to acknowledge him? Maybe apologizing would make things worse, maybe they'd just prefer never to hear from Dream again. But then, finally, there was a firm tap against his palm. No words, but a silent acknowledgement that Dream had been heard.

"I was a dick yesterday."

'No shit.'

"Sorry."

'I don't get it. What the hell did I do? I thought you liked me.'

"I panicked. It wasn't your fault."

'But you don't want a soulmate.'

Dream's stomach clenched, and he took a deep breath in. He could apologize completely, say he did want to be with them. He could turn his back on the years of worry his soulmark had given him and have a fairytale ending with his soulmate, just like every little kid was promised. His soulmate was caring and funny and clever, and they wanted *him*. He could say he hadn't meant it. He could have a happily ever after.

And that would be the biggest lie of all.

"I love someone else. That doesn't mean I should be an ass to you."

A long, painful silence followed.

'That's possible?'

"I'm sorry. You seem really cool. I wouldn't mind being friends, if you could forgive me."

'I need some time to think about it.'

The silence that followed hurt like hell, but Dream didn't fight it off this time. He'd said what had to be said. Even if this meant Dream would never find love, he cared about his soulmate enough not to lie to them, and he loved George too much to pretend otherwise. This was the right choice, he reminded himself, taking a deep breath of the crisp night air.

Whether it was right or not, though, it felt painfully like losing a piece of his heart.

Chapter End Notes

trying to have a weekly upload, but forgive me if i miss it now 'n' then! im terrible with scheduling lol

next chapter should b fun! both some action and some h/c ouo

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The End is coming. George decides to give up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pain is a powerful thing. Difficult to overcome or ignore, difficult to cope with. But Dream had spent his fair share of time learning how to deal with pain, and he found that few things could hide it better than a rush of adrenaline. Conveniently enough, he had a dangerous task that needed to be completed.

Now that night had fallen and cloaked the green fields in darkness, mobs began to creep out of the shadows, seeking weak prey to hunt. But Dream had no interest in the monsters from the overworld. Although they could be dangerous in hordes, they were not his quarry. He waited in the copse of trees as the last embers of his campfire dwindled away, watching the open fields closely, waiting for any trace of the endermen.

Eventually, something caught his eye. There was a faint shimmer of purple mist as the borders of reality blurred. In a sudden, jarring shift, a tall black beast appeared, its long gangly limbs moving with alien grace. It stood in the clearing, the unmistakable glow of its eyes like a beacon in the night. Endermen were as dangerous as they were strange, and battling them could be a deadly challenge if taken carelessly.

Dream slowly began moving in the creature's direction, keeping to the treeline where the underbrush hid him. Although he could use a strength potion, it seemed wasteful not to keep them for a fight against the hunters or the dragon. There weren't any nearby bodies of water he could lure it to either. Although he could try to splash it with his bucket, that wouldn't do enough damage to help. Tricks and tactics would help him against George, Sapnap, and Bad, but tonight he could only depend on his axe, his shield, and his skills to use them.

Finally, he reached the point of the treeline nearest the enderman. Any further out, and Dream would be past cover. He unhooked the axe from his belt, rolling his neck and taking a deep breath. Anything would be better than the silent dread hanging heavy in his mind. He needed a good fight.

As he burst out of the trees, his eyes and the enderman's met. Both shared the bloodthirsty fire of a creature both hunting and hunted. As Dream ran at the enderman, it began to run towards him, moving with terrifying speed for something so large.

It swung its sharpened black claws wildly. Even as Dream deflected the blows with his shield, the weight behind their impact made his arms ache. He took a step back, trying to adjust his stance without being shredded alive.

When he saw an opening, he lowered his shield to strike. As the enderman's claws grazed his shoulder, he buried his axe in its arm, spraying dark purple blood through the cold night air. It howled in pain and rage. Its attacks were fueled by relentless fury. Dream felt himself being pushed backward, his shield threatening to crack under the maelstrom of attacks.

It was not wearing down. He couldn't get in another hit, not without exposing himself to serious harm. Gritting his teeth, Dream hunkered down behind his shield, wincing with each impact of chitinous claws against wood. He kicked off the packed-dirt ground, slamming shield-first into the enderman. It stumbled back briefly, granting Dream a brief opening.

He slashed at the enderman violently, hacking and slashing. It screeched as it fought back, clawing at him anywhere it could reach. But Dream had the advantage now, and as the creature wore down, he saw his opportunity. With a single clean stroke, he slammed the axe deep into the mob's chest. Even when it fell still, Dream's heart still raced, his breath coming quick and shallow. His clothing was soaked with blood, mostly the deep purple of the enderman, but some his own bright red.

Although he wanted a moment to catch his breath, hesitancy would only give the other mobs of the night time to find him. Once Dream was sure none of his injuries were serious, and he had collected the pearl of the fallen monster, he began his search again.

It was a slow, painful process. Endermen were a powerful enemy to reckon with, and rarer than the walking dead that haunted every night. By the time the sun began to break over the horizon and turn the fields the golden color of dawn, he was bloodied and bruised, but had collected a total of eight ender pearls. With the pearls in the stronghold, it was possible this would be enough. Even if it wasn't, he'd have to wait until nightfall to hunt again.

Now that day had come, it hit Dream just how exhausted he was. His body ached miserably, and although he had at the very least wiped down and covered his wounds, he was still injured from the night's hunt. Sleeping on the surface would be a death sentence. Dream didn't have enough of a lead on the hunters to be certain he'd wake up before they found him. He decided to make the descent into the stronghold ruins first, figuring it would be an easier place to hide while he recovered.

Dream tunneled down into the ground until he found the distinct carved stone of the old strongholds, the bricks practically built into the very earth itself. Lighting a torch, he travelled the dark maze of hallways, fighting off monsters where they hid. A few dusty cobweb-covered chests provided him several more ender pearls, as well as a simple bow and some fresh armor. Although old, it was all well preserved, carefully stored for the day someone may need it.

When he came to the library, he decided that was where he would rest. It wasn't a decision founded so much on the location itself, more so the fact that Dream was rather certain he'd pass out if he didn't lay down soon. He tossed his things down in a narrow alcove, tucked away between the bookshelves like a small closet. He told himself it was hidden enough, eagerly accepting his own excuses.

Dream sat on the cold stone floor, peeling off his bloodstained hoodie and folding it beneath his backpack to act as a sort of makeshift pillow. He made the time to check his injuries, grateful he'd been on-pointe enough to avoid anything particularly serious. He felt hungry, having not made any time to eat in his night-long hunt, but more than that, he was tired. Although he had things he still needed to get done, exhaustion made the rough bricks seem as comfortable as any mattress, and he quickly drifted into a dark dreamless sleep.

Still, his sleep was shallow, easily broken by the sound of footsteps. Dream sat up, rubbing at his eyes as he reached for his axe, keeping an eye out for whatever zombie or skeleton had the misfortune of stumbling onto him. But the footsteps were more careful, more quiet. Rounding the bookshelf was an all too familiar face. *George*.

Even as Dream scrambled to ready himself for a fight, George lifted his hands, shaking his head. "Calm down, I'm not here to fight. No weapons, no armor, see?" he said. Rather than waiting for Dream to stand, George sat down next to him. "I left all my stuff with Bad and Sapnap."

He definitely *looked* unarmed. He didn't even have his backpack. Still, Dream felt wary, trying to piece together whether he was dreaming or not. "If you came here to spy on me, it was pretty stupid to show yourself," he pointed out.

George smiled, but there was something strained to it, an exhaustion that ran deeper than the physical. "It's not that either. It's... actually, it's super dumb," he said, pushing his goggles up on his forehead, not meeting Dream's eyes. "I've just had a lot of shit on my mind, and the only thing I could think of that would make me feel better is being with you."

Dream felt his heartbeat pick up, blood rushing to his cheeks. A part of his mind screamed not to fall for it, that it had to be some sort of trap for manhunt. But that voice in his head was so easily drowned out by his pounding heart, that all Dream could do was nod dumbly, scooting over to make room for George.

George crawled into the small space, laying down beside Dream. There was little room between the bookshelves, only just enough space for the two of them to fit. Dream could feel his brain fizzling out as George curled up against his side, his touch warm and gentle, his expression soft yet guarded. Although Dream had cuddled with Sapnap when they were kids, this felt so different from laying by a friend. Every movement was cautious and tender. Every bated breath was a comfort. And all he could see was George's face, tired and thoughtful, his dark hair framing him like a painting in a museum.

Again, it struck Dream how easy it would be to lean forward and kiss George, and how painfully unfair it would be. It took all his self-restraint not to cup George's cheek, to gently run his thumb across George's jaw. It wasn't right to cross that line, especially not when George looked so fragile. So all Dream could do was be secretly grateful for the closeness, and say nothing of it.

"You said there was shit on your mind," Dream said, his voice soft. "We can talk about it. I don't care how stupid your problems are, Georgie, I want to help."

George shook his head, leaning in and wrapping his arms around Dream. It was such a small gesture, one that he could have easily missed if it were anyone but George; George who was so guarded with his affection, even through words alone. Even this simple gesture was a precious gift, as valuable as hills of diamonds and gold. "I don't want to talk about it," George said, meeting

Dream's eyes. "It's stupid. I just don't want to be alone."

Dream's breath caught in his throat. "You weren't alone. What about Sapnap, or Bad? Weren't you with them?" he asked, softly, praying the question didn't sound like he wanted George to leave.

George broke eye contact, biting his own lip gently, and there was a brief pause as though he couldn't decide his answer. "It's different," he eventually said, speaking slowly, as though uncertain of his own words. "They're my friends. But they're not /you./"

God, that couldn't be good for Dream's heart. He laughed at the irony of it all, at how he could say the same thing back and mean so much more than George would ever know. Instead, he just said, "Are you simping for me?"

"No, ew!" George said, laughing. "You're the simp! It's all 'George why won't you say you love me,' and 'George why are you messaging Sapnap and not me.' You sent me feet pics, Dream, and you say I'm the simp?"

Dream wheezed, shoving his elbow into George lightly. "The feet pics were a fucking joke and you know it!" Still, it occurred to Dream that he wasn't sure how much of the flirting and fake jealousy *was* a joke. How long had he been pushing down his feelings? How long had he been in love with George without even realizing it?

"Hmmm, sounds sus to me," George said, wiggling his eyebrows. His mischievous smirk relaxed into a smile, and he moved one of his hands to rest it over Dream's, lacing their fingers together. It was a simple motion, deceptively innocent and heartachingly tender. It was not a storybook moment; their hands were not two puzzle pieces, perfectly shaped to interlock. It was mismatched, and warm, and beautifully wonderfully imperfect.

It was so easy to let his guard down, to ignore the dangers of manhunt or the stronghold and just melt into the comfort of laying here with George. Even as sleep began to pull again at the edges of his mind, Dream found himself wishing he could stay awake, knowing no dreams could ever be as precious as this moment.

Still, he must have fallen asleep eventually, because the next thing he remembered was being gently shaken awake. And god, Dream could get used to waking up to George's eyes. "Hi," Dream mumbled, still half asleep.

"It's sunset," George said softly. "I need to go back to Sapnap and Bad. Manhunt isn't over, and I told them I'd be back by night."

"Don't leave," Dream whined.

George smiled, pulling away as he sat up. "I'll probably be back later today to kill you," he said. He leaned down, and Dream's heart stopped. George pressed a gentle, brief kiss into the forehead of Dream's mask. He was slow and hesitant, as if uncertain he was doing the right thing. Silence stretched long between them. "I think... I'm giving up on soulmates," George said, his voice as soft and fragile as a whisper.

Before Dream could reply, before he could realize the implications, George was gone.

And all Dream could think was "*Holy shit.*"

Chapter End Notes

oh shoot i'm not that far ahead anymore! i'll try to get more chapters done, but if i fall off my weekly schedule, that's why oops o-O

in the meantime, enjoy some fluff! because next couple of chapters, we're bringing the "hurt" back into hurt/comfort :3

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The End, but not the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream could barely think as he collected his things and crafted the Eyes of Ender, his head pounding with frantic emotions he didn't know how to name. George's message had seemed so clear, but what if he was just believing what he wanted to believe? But then, there was the kiss against his mask, so gentle and sweet. Even just the memory of it made his traitorous heart beat faster. Wasn't that proof it was something more?

Dream leaned back, staring up at the ceiling as if the answers would be carved there in the stone. Should he be excited? It seemed so sudden for George to give up on soulmates. Was he choosing Dream over his soulmate, or was Dream a second choice, a consolation prize? Even if George did really want Dream the way Dream wanted him, would it be enough?

Some people claimed soulmates were a single spirit, split into two people; and only once they met their lost half could they ever be whole. Others said a life without your soulmate was empty of meaning, like living in the darkness for a lifetime. Dream had grown used to what these ideas meant for him. But what about George? Was he throwing away his right to be happy, to be *complete*?

What could Dream offer that even held a candle to a love fated by the universe itself?

As he so often did, Dream stepped back from the tangle of frustrations in his head, distracting himself with busywork and competitions and waiting for his problems to disappear.

It took longer than he cared to admit to find the portal room, deep in the twisting maze of the stronghold. Dispatching of the silverfish was easy, and once the area was cleared, he put all of the Eyes of Ender in the portal frame but one. He wouldn't go through, not yet. Impulsive as he was, he knew better than to fight a dragon without being certain he was prepared.

Dream sat on the steps to his portal, peeling off the makeshift bandages from his fight with the endermen the night before. Although they stung, nothing seemed infected. He washed each wound carefully, wincing whenever he wiped too hard against the damaged skin. Briefly, he wondered what his soulmate thought of the pain. Did they still worry about him? He wanted to write to them, to talk, but they'd asked for time to think. They needed space.

Dream took more care wrapping his wounds, less for his own sake and more out of guilt that he might cause his soulmate unnecessary pain. How strange it was that only a month ago he'd have taken vindictive pleasure in knowing they had to suffer with him. This had been all so much easier when he could hate his soulmate blindly. Everything had seemed so simple then. Now, he found himself missing the insistent scrapes and jabs on his skin, the stillness seeming all too heavy and lonely.

He was snapped out of his thoughts by a sound. Footsteps? It was brief, only an echo from somewhere else in the stronghold. It felt silent quickly. It could be one of the mobs that roamed the halls. It could be the soft groans of old earth struggling under its own weight. Or it could be the hunters. If they'd been near enough for George to run ahead, they had to have been close to the stronghold regardless. The stop had been too abrupt, like the pace of someone realizing their footsteps were too loud. It had to be them.

Dream quickly pulled one of the potions of strength from his belt. He threw his head back, quickly gulping it down. It burned down his throat, the taste of fungus and sulphur bitter in his mouth. Before it was even completely down, he could feel the heat of the potion seeping out, melting into his blood and bones. A new bout of energy surged through him, like a fire lit beneath his skin. He grabbed his axe, watching the one entrance to the room, waiting.

The seconds dragged by like days, and with each passing moment, the silence weighed heavier. No footsteps. No voices. No hunters.

The silence didn't bring relief. Dream's grip on the axe tightened, eyes darting back and forth, searching desperately for some sign of movement. Now and then he thought he saw something, only to realize it was the flickering of the torchlight, a trick of the dark. The hunters were close. They had to be. So why couldn't Dream see them? Where were they?

Then, a faint shuffle. Careful, almost silent footsteps, only audible because they were so close by. /Impossibly/ close by, as if in the same room. Dream slowly backed up, his mind racing. Realization clicked into place.

For a moment, the air seemed to shimmer, like a ripple in the light. Dream swung his axe at the ripple, a flash of red blood arcing through the air. “Ow, fudge! Guys, he knows we’re here!” Dream lunged forward, swinging again, but nothing made contact.

There were pounding footsteps, running back out of the portal room. Before Dream could follow, a sudden pain shot through his arm. He stumbled back in shock. With a glimmer of fading invisibility, he found a pair of small silver daggers lodged in his arm. He swore under his breath, wincing as he ripped them out.

He looked up in time to see the stone entrance of the portal room collapse. Definitely not a coincidental cave-in, but what exactly was it supposed to do? All it meant was Dream was stuck in the room where he needed to be, and it would only take a few minutes to mine out anyway. Why go through all the trouble to sneak up and pen him in, then? There had to be a catch, even if he didn’t see it. He started backing up towards the portal.

The sound of cracking stone pulled his attention up. A pair of holes were knocked into the ceiling of the room, immediately followed by an acrid chemical hiss. Dream swore as the lit TNT started dropping through the ceiling, followed by the sound of muffled laughter overhead. He had an easy escape route, sure, but it was a one way ticket. This attack wasn’t murder. It was crowd control.

“Assholes, I wanted to get more arrows!” Dream shouted, sprinting up the last few steps to the portal. He grabbed the last Eye of Ender from his pocket, cramming it into the final open socket. There was an earth-shaking quake as a rip tore open in the heart of the portal.

It was as though some unseen god had driven a dagger through reality itself, opening a bleeding wound into the starry sky. The tear expanded, racing outwards, as if to consume all the world--only to be contained by the portal frame, the void lashing like waves in a storm.

There wasn’t time to hesitate. Even if he could some tank his way through the coming explosion, the hunters would be there to swoop in and get him while he was down. Dream made the leap of faith, throwing himself into the void of stars below. Just as the darkness swallowed him, he could

hear the sounds of exploding gunpowder and collapsing stone. Then, the sound cut out, as suddenly silent as the end of a dream.

He crashed into the obsidian platform on the other side, scraping his knees against the rough surface. He could spare a few seconds to catch his breath. The tnt was likely still going off, so he'd have some precious brief moments before the hunters came through the portal after him.

Dream quickly climbed to the ledge of endstone that hung out over the platform, moving quietly so as not to draw unwanted attention from the mobs that lurked nearby. He dug through his inventory for anything that might give him the slightest edge. The strength potion still coursed through him, but considering how stacked the hunters were, that alone wouldn't save him. Although the few arrows he did have could help, they were hardly a game changer either. He had a few mob drops left over from hunting down endermen, but what good were those?

Wait. Actually....

Dream grinned, grabbing a fistful of string and the last of his scrap wood. He didn't have much time. His work was rushed, the construction shoddy, but nonetheless he managed to put together a serviceable fishing rod.

The hunters would be through any second now. Dream didn't waste so much as a second of his time alone, dragging his pickaxe along the endstone ledge, knocking out the handholds he'd used to climb up himself. It wouldn't do much, but it would slow the others down, even if only briefly. All he needed was a few seconds advantage to pull this off.

In an ideal world, he would've had more time to prepare, or to set up a more functional trap to guarantee success, but manhunt wasn't about an "ideal world." If it weren't for the split-moment decisions, for the razor wire between life and death, then it wouldn't be fun in the first place.

Three shimmers of purple light took form on the obsidian platform, one after the other. They quickly solidified into human forms as the hunters materialized in The End. Dream immediately swung his fishing rod towards the nearest person.

“He’s got a fishing rod!” George yelled, tackling Sapnap out of the way. Unfortunately, though, Bad happened to be standing just behind Sapnap. The hook pierced into the front of Bad’s hoodie. With a celebratory woop, Dream swung the fishing rod out, sending Bad flying into the air.

Bad grabbed onto the line of the fishing rod, holding on for dear life as it strained under his weight. “DREAM, YOU MUFFIN!” he squealed, legs kicking frantically as Dream tried to swing him off into the void. “OH MY GOODNESS!” Bad lost his grip, and the front of his hoodie tore, launching him towards the infinite drop beyond. Right before he vanished from sight, he pulled a shimmering green pearl from his pocket.

Odds were good that Bad survived that, and George and Sapnap were already climbing up. This wasn’t going quite how Dream planned. He turned and ran, sprinting across the porous stone of the end. Not far from the obsidian platform was a circle of huge obsidian towers, the telltale sign of a dragon’s nest. Although killing the hunters would make it easier for Dream to work, it wasn’t strictly necessary. He’d just have to fight better and fight faster.

He grabbed the bow from his back, nocking an arrow as he ran. Ten spires of obsidian clawed at the sky like jagged teeth, each with a purple gem shimmering at its peak. At the center was a nest, wide and shallow, carved from jagged bedrock. Hearing his approach, the creature that lay there rose, spreading its massive black wings and baring its fangs. Of all the beasts that made the barren wastes of The End their homes, none carried the same threat as the dragons.

Dream ignored the dragon as it took flight, sprinting towards the nest. Quickly, he started firing arrows from his bow at the first of the floating crystals above the obsidian pillars. As soon as his arrow grazed the edge of the crystal, it exploded in a burst of light, purple glass-like shards raining down.

He had more than enough arrows to take out all the crystals, but fighting the dragon would have to be up close and personal. Not the best option, but it was possible. He pressed himself flat against one of the pillars as the dragon swooped past, the force of its size shaking the ground. Dream started taking out the other crystals, not willing to risk a moment with both the hunters and a dragon pursuing him. By the seventh crystal, George and Sapnap have climbed onto the island proper, each pulling out a bow of their own. Dream weaved through the crowds of endermen for some semblance of cover. His heart pounded in his throat like the banging of a war drum. /’So close.’/

Suddenly, a shooting pain pierced Dream's leg. He stumbled, a small gasp of pain breaking from him. He found not an arrow, but a small throwing knife, half-buried in his calf. Clenching his teeth, he ripped it out with a wince. His eyes locked with Badboyhalo's, the hunter sprinting towards him with a second pair of knives already drawn.

Dream took his fishing rod in one hand, and his axe in the other. He swung the rod forward, the hook catching on the front of Bad's shirt. Before Bad had a chance to cut the line, Dream pulled. As Bad was yanked towards him, Dream swung his axe to meet him.

"Nononono fudg--" before Bad could finish his thought, the axe cleaved through his chest, and his body vanished in a burst of smoke. One down. Still, the wound to Dream's leg made it hurt to stand, let alone walk or run. He couldn't let the game go on much longer if he wanted to win.

Up the hill, Sapnap and George lowered their bows, breaking into a run at the sight of Bad vanishing. The three men left standing all drew their shields and axes. As they came close, the two hunters slowed down, approaching Dream carefully. All of them were on guard, each second pulling the tension slowly more taut.

"Hey Dream," Sapnap said, grinning mischievously. "Funny seeing you here."

"Shut up," Dream said, pulling a face. "Your tnt thing was dumb, was that supposed to kill me?"

George laughed (that should've been against the rules, he was so /cute/ when he laughed, it was ridiculously distracting). "Maybe it didn't kill you, but the look on your face was priceless," he said, smirking over the edge of his shield.

Dream lowered one hand, smiling. "Can't wait to see /your/ face when I win." Quickly, he grabbed one of the strength potions from his belt, knocking it down in one painful swallow. He wasn't sure if the other one had worn off yet or not, but it renewed his energy nonetheless. He turned and swung his axe at George.

It hits George's shield, wooden splinters scattering from the impact. Sapnap took that as his moment to strike, though Dream was quick to deflect and get in a shallow hit of his own. The time between attacks passed slowly, weighed by caution and care. Neither of the hunters wanted to face the brunt of a strength potion, and Dream wasn't too keen on being split with a diamond axe.

The dragon dove from its spiraled flight overhead, bearing down on all three of them with its fangs bared. Purple energy crackled in its open jaw.

George leapt out of the way. Dream lunged forward, grabbing Sapnap by the collar of his shirt. He threw Sapnap in the direction of the dragon, and himself to the ground. Sapnap yelped as the viscous purple smoke burned around him, managing to drop down, narrowly avoiding the dragon as it flew inches overhead before soaring skyward again. The splashback of the dragon's breath had grazed Dream too--a pain somewhere between electric and poisonous, unpleasant and alien. Still, he took advantage of the moment the dragon had created, lunging forward and bringing the axe down before Sapnap could get back to his feet.

There was no way of knowing how far off the hunters would respawn. Dream may have bought himself enough time to win this, or Sapnap and Bad could come running back into the fight at any second. Whether luck was on his side or not, George was still a threat. And the dragon--Sapnap had dropped a few arrows, but still not enough to beat the dragon.

He would have to get creative.

George charged toward Dream, but instead of facing him and trading blows, Dream ran. He sprinted across the stretches of endstone, pain shooting through his wounded leg with every pounding step. Overhead, the dragon let out a howling snarl, circling above the two remaining intruders, readying itself to dive at them again.

An arrow whistled past Dream's ear, and he could hear George shouting, but between the adrenaline and the pain, he couldn't make out any words. As Dream reached the edge of the bedrock nest, the dragon folded its wings back, flying down towards him with a furious roar. There would be a split-second window between survival and a painfully bloody end.

Dream smiled.

At the last moment, he dove out of the way of the dragon's bared teeth. He ducked below the powerful black wing before sprinting up the endstone. He threw himself into a blind jump with outstretched arms. The ground fell away beneath his feet.

Dream held on tightly to the side of the dragon, the obsidian scales cutting into his skin, the alien muscles twisting as the monster flew skyward again. He kicked wildly for any sort of foothold, but only found open air. Wincing, he tried to drag himself up with his arms, the hide of the dragon slicing his skin. He managed to get a grip on one of the jagged spikes down the dragon's back, pulling himself up and holding on for his very life. He was on the back of a goddamn dragon.

The dragon flapped its wings, letting out another ear-piercing scream. It flew violently, rolling its body through the air, trying to throw off the pest clinging to its back. Dream dug his heels into the side of the dragon, desperately fighting to keep his grip even as it spun and dove. If it weren't for the strength potion still coursing through his veins, he'd likely have been thrown off from the start. Hands shaking, he forced himself to let go with one hand, grabbing the hilt of his axe.

The dragon lurched to the side, and Dream slipped. He bit back a curse as he swung out over the void. His fingers bled where he clutched the dragon's rough hide, threatening to lose his grip at any second. A brief glance down made his stomach drop. Endstone and void alike sped by far below. It was impossible to differentiate between George and the endermen, all barely specks of shadow on the pale stone. Dream's breath caught in his throat, his body going stiff.

One of the empty potion bottles slipped from his belt, the glass glinting before it vanished. The fall was too far to see the impact; to see it shatter into shards, to know just exactly how bad it would be if Dream lost his grip.

As the dragon turned in the air, it banked to the side, giving Dream just enough leverage to drag himself back up. His whole body shuddered, his knuckles going white as he tried to hold on even tighter. Still, he'd successfully unsheathed his axe, somehow without dropping it. He started edging forward, gripping scales and spikes tightly, not daring to risk another fall. Luck wouldn't be on his side twice.

Dream raised the axe high above his head. He swung it down with all his force, sinking it several inches into the black scaly hide. Viscous purple blood burst out from the wound. The dragon screamed in pained anger, thrashing furiously through the sky. Dream ripped his axe loose, barely managing to stay on the dragon's back. His grip was tight, but the blood made the scales slick and wet, and it took all his strength not to be thrown off.

Again, he swung the axe down, deeper and deeper. The axe struck against the massive dragon like a pickaxe against stone, or a hammer against an anvil. Each stroke was rhythmic, steady, violent. It became harder and harder to see, his vision clouded by a purple haze of blood and dragon's breath, but he kept striking blindly. He'd been wounded enough, and he was short on resources. If Dream didn't bring the dragon down now, he'd lost.

It struggled to stay in flight, barely managing to beat its wings hard enough to stay airborne. Beneath the hide, raw purple and blue muscles bled freely into the dark End air. Dream was out of the last hunter's reach, and now, so very close to victory. When he felt its wings falter, he knew the fight was done. It began to plummet, trailing blood and viscera like a morbid shooting star. The crash would be enough to kill the creature, and the game would, at last, be over. Dream let out a slight breath of relief, reaching for one of his last ender pearls so he could make the leap to safety.

A piercing agony shot between Dream's shoulders. A gasp of pain broke from him. He was falling, knocked off the dragon by the arrow now lodged in his back. The wind roared past as he fell, the once-distant ground hurtling towards him. Before he could try to do something, /anything/ to catch himself, to break his fall, his body met the ground with a sickening crack.

Black and white fireworks burst behind Dream's eyes, his mind too overwhelmed with pain to make sense of what he saw. He tried to move, but his body didn't respond. Each breath in, shallower than the last, painful to try and pull in the air he needed. It felt as though his lungs had filled with blood, drowning in its own wounds. He could barely feel his own body, connected to it only by the pain that beat down on him, but nonetheless he was fairly certain his spine wasn't meant to twist so far.

He could hear, distantly, pained screaming. Was it him? He didn't think he had the energy to scream. Still, the sound rang in his head, a fitting match to the suffering he was under.

Then, all at once, the pain was muted, like a dark afterimage. Not gone, but no longer present either.

It felt like floating in a lake. Cold. Weightless. There was void in every direction, and what seemed to be stars, though they vanished whenever you tried to look at them directly. Maybe it was the ringing in his head, but it sounded as though two voices were whispering, their words unfamiliar, their language, indistinguishable.

And all at once, the feeling was gone, and Dream was staring at a blank ceiling. He sat up slowly, his body protesting as though it were covered in bruises. He glanced around, his head still a fog, and tried to collect his senses. He was lying on a bed in a dim room, dusk light filtering in through the shutters. There was a glass of water and a bottle of painkillers on the bedside table. He could hear two muffled voices still, but the language and the speakers were familiar. As the blur of pain and adrenaline faded, Dream realized he'd respawned back in Sapnap's guest bedroom.

At last, the game of manhunt was over.

Chapter End Notes

How are we doing gamers? got some good stuff coming up!

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

the aftermath of the manhunt, and the distance that follows.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream opened the door, poking his head out into the living room, where the house was tinted orange by the dusk light. Sapnap and Bad were sitting together on the couch, their conversation cutting off abruptly when they noticed Dream's return.

"Dream!" Bad said enthusiastically, waving. "You're back! Does that mean George beat you? Did we win?"

Sapnap looked up from his phone, shooting Dream a grin. "Man, throwing me in front of the dragon? You're soooo annoying. Come on, what did we miss? Fill us in on everything."

Dream rubbed the side of his head, flopping down in an empty armchair, still winded from the fight. "I won. I think," he said, frowning. "I know the dragon died! But like, I did too, and I don't know which happened first."

"If you died, the hunters won," Sapnap said smugly.

"No! If the dragon died first, then the game ended before I died, and I won," Dream argued. "We'll just have to wait for George." He melted into a soft smile at the thought of his friend. He and George would have a lot to talk about. After the night they'd spent together in the stronghold, things were definitely going to change. He hoped they'd be changing for the better.

"We can decide who actually won over dinner," Sapnap said, getting to his feet and stretching. "I'm so tired of eating wildberries and rabbits and shit, I just want some goddamn pizza."

“Language,” Bad said automatically, though he seemed too excited about the potential pizza to actually be upset. “We can rent a movie, too! After all that running around fighting, I think we’ve all earned some nice lazy fun. Like a sleepover party!”

Dream glanced back down the hall, hesitating. “Shouldn’t we wait for George to get back first?”

Sapnap shrugged, walking over to the coatrack to grab a windbreaker, counting out the handful of emeralds in its pocket. “The return portal is basically instant, right? If he isn’t back by now, he’s probably stayed behind to collect ender pearls or something, he’s fine. I’m sure your boyfriend will turn up any minute.”

“Shut up,” Dream said, throwing a pillow at Sapnap’s back, his cheeks burning with embarrassment. “We aren’t-- whatever, you’re stupid.” Although Sapnap was probably right, and George would be back soon enough, but Dream couldn’t help feeling anxious all the same. Maybe it was the adrenaline. Maybe he was simping to hard. “You guys go ahead without me,” Dream said, looking down the hall again, waiting for George to appear at any moment. “I’m gonna stay behind. Someone’s gotta let him know where everyone disappeared too.”

“Leaving him a note would do the same thing,” Bad said, failing to hide a grin. “It’s okay to say you want to see your friend, you big potato! George missed you lots when we were playing, its okay for you to miss him too!”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise, seeing as George had literally paused the game to come spend time with Dream, but hearing it said aloud made Dream feel warm all over. “Alright, alright, so maybe I want to see him a little bit,” Dream said. He paused a moment, then broke into an embarrassed grin. “Or a lot.”

“Hell yeah, go win your mans,” Sapnap said, punching Dream’s arm. “But if you’re not helping us get dinner, then I’m gonna get a pineapple and olive pizza,” he added with a smirk, pulling on his windbreaker and heading for the front door.

Bad let out a squeal of protest before sprinting after Sapnap. “What do you mean olives?”

Snappynap, wait, I don't want olives on the pizza!" The two of them disappeared down the hall, and a moment later, their voices were cut out by the sound of a shutting door.

Just like that, Dream was left alone with his thoughts. At the very least that meant he wasn't wanting for company; it was like there was a crowd of people in his head, all loudly bickering over different possibilities.

He was worried about George. He was excited to see him again. He wasn't sure things would go right for the two of them. But god, if things /did/ go right, if he could be with the boy he loved after a lifetime so certain he was unloveable, it was all Dream could ever ask for. So many possibilities, both frightening and exciting. So many ways things could go wrong, so many ways it could go right. Honestly, it made his head spin.

Hoping to clear his head, he stepped into Sappnap's backyard for some fresh air. It was cold and crisp out, the tall trees around the village bearing less of their colorful leaves than earlier that week, the threat of winter distant, but present nonetheless. The lanterns attached to the house's overhang kept the shadows at a distance. One such shadow caught Dream's eye, a familiar stack of hay bales forming a makeshift target.

He smiled inwardly, a slight blush rising to his cheeks at the memory of practicing archery with George, only a few days before. Maybe he should fire a few arrows. Keep his mind off of how long it was taking George to get back. Glancing around, Dream found a spare bow and a few blunted practice arrows leaned up against the house, probably belonging to Sappnap. It probably wouldn't be a big deal if he borrowed those. Nocking an arrow against the bowstring, he walked over to the target, and lined up his shot.

Dream loosed the arrow, and then another, firing all the arrows one after another. Once they were all gone, he crossed the field, gathered them up, and started all over. It was a simple, comforting rhythm, easy enough to manage after the taxing manhunt, but involved enough to keep his mind from drifting. For the most part, anyway. Now and then, he'd find himself thinking about George in his arms, carefully adjusting his technique, his soft body pressed against his side.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed. A few times, Dream would go back inside, checking George's guestroom in the hopes he'd returned and gone straight to bed. But every time, the room was empty, without so much as a hint that George had returned. It was fine, probably, but as time crawled forward, Dream found himself getting more and more worked up.

As another arrow sunk into the hay bale, Dream lowered the bow, falling into anxious pacing. Although Sapnap was probably right, it was still frustrating not to know. The End was a dangerous place, and deaths to the void below it could be unpredictable. What if something had happened? What if something was keeping George from coming back?

Dream gave in, snatching the phone from his pocket. There were a few texts from Bad and Sapnap asking about his opinion on which movie to rent, but Dream scrolled past them, pulling up George's contact. Interdimensional communication was pretty hit-or-miss, but if Dream didn't at least try to check in, he was going to go crazy.

Dream: Gogy, where are you? :(

He sat down on the back step of Sapnap's house, tapping his foot as he waited for a reply. It was stupid to be this anxious. George was more than capable of taking care of himself. So why wasn't he back yet?

Was he avoiding Dream?

Dream bit his lip, out of habit grabbing his own wrist where his soulmark lay. Had he done something wrong? He felt his stomach knot, his mind racing as he tried to think of something he might have said to scare George off. He was almost startled when his phone dinged.

George: In The End still.

Dream: Did the portal back not open or smth? Where are you

George: Portal's fine, I just need to do some stuff first.

Dream: Dont stay too long, were gonna have pizza and a movie

Dream: I love Bad & Sap, but like, whats the point if you arent here Gogy

George: Just give me like, an hour alone.

Dream hesitated, tapping the side of his phone absently, trying to think of what to say next. George's messages felt strangely stiff, reserved. They'd been friends long enough that Dream liked to think he could tell when the other was upset. After some thought, he sent another message.

Dream: You ok?

George: Its fine.

Dream: Well if its ever not fine, you can always talk to me or something

George: I don't want to talk about it.

Dream ran his hands through his hair, taking a slow deep breath. God, what had he done wrong? Maybe he /had/ won after all, and George was just being a sore loser. It seemed like a bit of an overreaction though, even for George. Maybe when George had come to him in the stronghold, Dream had done something wrong. Been too clingy, been too distant, said the wrong things--he and George had fought before, sure, but this was different. Dream felt his stomach clench, an

unpleasant thought floating to the surface.

Maybe George had only just realized that Dream was in love with him. Maybe, the worst had come true, and his stupid feelings had ruined their friendship. He wanted to believe that George would be his friend no matter what, but god, fear could crack even the strongest faith.

Dream: Alright, I'll make sure we save some pizza for you

He typed a few more messages, but ended up deleting each one without sending it, staring at the screen. Although it showed that George had read the last message, he hadn't bothered to reply. It was so simple, so dumb, but Dream couldn't help but analyze the silence closely, desperate for some clue to what had gone wrong.

He glanced back at the target, but suddenly felt exhausted. For once, his thoughts would not suffocate under adrenaline, overpowering his ruthless attempts at distraction. He'd been running from them for so long, and now that he was worn down, they'd finally caught up to him.

Dream dropped the bow and blunted arrows at the side of the house, walked inside, and flopped face down on the couch, burying his face in the worn cushions. Even though he'd spent months looking forward to finally meeting his best friends in person, suddenly he wished he were home. He wished he were in his empty house, in a village full of people who didn't give a damn about him, where shutting out the world was all so easy.

Had it really only been the day before that he'd been curled up against George in the stronghold? It felt so distant now, like a memory from another life.

Whether it was the emotional exhaustion, or the manhunt had taken a greater toll on him than he'd thought, Dream eventually drifted off into a shallow, restless sleep. He caught glimpses of wakefulness now and then--the front door creaking opening, the greasy smell of pizza, hushed whispers nearby--but it was never enough to actually wake him. When he did finally come to, it was pitch black outside, and he wasn't alone on the couch anymore.

Dream opened his eyes to find his head resting on a blanket in Bad's lap, with Sapnap cuddled against his side. As much as he missed George, waking up cuddled by two of his closest friends did a lot to ease the pain in his chest. There was a movie playing on the tv, the volume turned down as low as possible without being silenced. Bad seemed to have fallen asleep himself at some point, but Sapnap was still awake to notice Dream stirring.

"Hey," Sapnap said quietly. "There's still some pizza in the fridge, if you're hungry."

Dream shook his head, doing his best not to fall back asleep, even though drowsiness still hung over him like a cloud. "Is George back?" he asked softly.

Sapnap picked up the remote, pausing the movie. "Yeah. Stayed in his room, though. Did something happen with you two?" The unsaid meaning is clear. *'You clearly aren't okay.'*

"I don't know," Dream answered honestly. It was tempting to go see George right away, and he almost got up, but he forced himself to stay. George was probably sleeping. They'd see each other in the morning, work things out then. Hell, maybe the sudden distance was only in Dream's head. "Did he say anything to you?"

"No," Sapnap said. "But he was being more of an ass than usual. We'll probably all feel better after we get some real sleep, though."

Dream closed his eyes, wondering, briefly, if this was the same heartache he'd put his soulmate through. "Yeah," Dream said, although he wasn't sure he believed himself. "Yeah. Everything will be fine tomorrow."

It had to be.

i have no idea how long this fic is going to be but we've at least passed the halfway point, i think :)

thank you all for your lovely comments!

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tensions are high the morning after the manhunt. Bad tries to help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Everything was not immediately fine.

George was the last person to wake up (not inherently unusual, as it seemed like the man was capable of sleeping through the end of the world.) Bad had announced they'd celebrate their first morning back with a "breakfast party," and recruited Sapnap and Dream to help him cook. That didn't turn out well. Dream was put on scrambled egg duty, but he was having trouble focusing, and he'd burnt the eggs several times now. Meanwhile, apparently Sapnap couldn't be trusted to cook anything more complex than a bowl of cereal without starting housefires. So in the end, it was just Bad humming to himself as he bustled around the kitchen like a retro housewife, while Dream and Sapnap set the table in awkward near-silence.

Eventually, George joined them, and the four of them sat around the table. It felt so different from the last breakfast they'd shared together, the playful jabs and warm banter gone in favor of a tension so thick you could choke on it.

Bad was either oblivious to the uncomfortable atmosphere or had the good temper of a saint, because he was happily chatting as if nothing were wrong, practically carrying the conversation all on his own. "I hope everything tastes okay! I would've baked some muffins too, but Sapnap doesn't have any gluten-free muffin mix. Still, I think we earned a fun breakfast after that manhunt! I was a little nervous at first, but it was so much fun, and I can't stop thinking about new strategies we could try next time! I'm so glad we played it, everyone did so good."

Sapnap, with his mouth half-full of cheesy golden scrambled eggs, nodded enthusiastically. "I forgot how awesome manhunt is. Speaking of, Bad, you really came in clutch with those throwing knives. You have *got* to teach me that sometime."

“Aww, of course Snapmap!” Bad said brightly, clapping his hands together. “And Dream, you were so memey with that fishing rod! I thought I was a goner! Still, if we had one more person on our team, I bet that would’ve been enough to get you.” He paused, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “Oh, I wonder if Ant would like this game? Maybe we could invite him to play next time!”

Dream disinterestedly poked at his eggs, putting on a smile he didn’t quite feel. “Manhunt, but every time I win, there’s a new hunter,” he said half-jokingly. He swallowed the saliva pooling in his throat, trying to work up his nerve. “By the way, George?” His friend jumped like a startled animal, looking at Dream for what seemed like the first time that day. “Your archery was amazing. Like, you improved so much it’s crazy. Leave some talent for the rest of us, yeah?”

George shrugged, taking a long slow drink from his mug. When he set it down, he glanced out the window, as if he wanted to be anywhere else in the world. “I guess,” he said.

Uncomfortable silence fell over the room, only broken by Dream’s foot tapping against the floor, burning through a sea of anxious energy. The pause lasted just long enough to be distinctly awkward, until Sappnap finally cleared his throat and spoke up. “So, you guys are staying another week or two, right? What do you wanna do for the rest of the visit? There’s, uh, this harvest festival thing the town does. It’s like, four days from now, but other than that, I have no fucking clue what to do.”

“Language,” Bad chided, looking from George to Dream with a concentrated pout. When neither of them offered anything, he spoke. “Okay, so all of you are being muffinheads. We can talk about it, or we can do something fun to make things less dumb and weird, but we are definitely not going to all sit around like a bunch of big dumb potatoes.”

When no one spoke up, Sappnap said tentatively, “I guess we could play a card game?”

Bad sighed, crossing his arms and shaking his head. “Oh my goodness. Looks like it’s all up to me, as usual.” Before anyone could ask him what that even meant, he stood up, slamming his hands down on the table so hard the dishware rattled. “We’re going to do a team scavenger hunt! Everyone is going to bond, and laugh, and have so much fun it’s ridiculous! The winners get to pick a forfeit for the losers. Is that enough to make you moody muffins cheer up?”

Dammit. All of them were fairly competitive, and Bad knew it. Nobody wanted to say they weren't interested, because then they'd be accused of being scared. It was an unspoken challenge, and they were all too stupidly stubborn to back down. "Sounds cool," Sapnap said, grabbing his phone. "Let's type up a list of the things we'll need to find. If the deadline is lunch, we can all meet up back here to see who won."

It did sound kind of fun, and if they were pairing off, it would give Dream the chance he needed to talk to George alone. They needed to address whatever it was that was going on between them. Besides, maybe once the tension was cut, it would be fun to hang out, just the two of them.

While Bad and Sapnap brainstormed ideas for the scavenger hunt targets, Dream stole a glance at George, his stomach twisting with anxiety. God, it was so *stupid*. He couldn't so much as look at his best friend without feeling light-headed. Maybe it was the way sleepiness seemed to soften George's expression, or the way the morning sun shone on his dark eyelashes. It was unfair how he could make something as simple as staring out a window utterly breathtaking.

Of course, when Dream was so focused on George, it was impossible to miss when he announced, "I want to be on Sapnap's team."

Dream wasn't really *angry*, so to speak. George could do whatever he liked, be on a team with anyone he wanted to. And as for Sapnap, it hadn't been his idea. No one had done anything wrong, and it wasn't fair to be angry, but Dream still kind of wanted Sapnap to fall down a deep ditch. He wasn't jealous, just... he just really wanted to work things out with George. He wasn't jealous, though. He didn't *get* jealous.

"Sapnap lives here so he's going to have the advantage when it comes to finding stuff," George continued. "And I need the help since I'm colorblind. It's just fair."

Dream snorted, rolling his eyes. "Gogy, you're acting as if you're like, /blind/ blind. You don't want to be on his team so it's fair, you want to be on his team so you can win," he said.

George stood up, grabbing his jacket from the hook on the wall, offering a smile that felt just a little stiff. "What is it Dream? Scared you're going to lose to me again?"

Dream stood up so quickly he almost knocked over his mug, hurrying to zip up the front of his hoodie. “What? No! And I didn’t lose, there’s no way I died before the dragon did. That’s it, you’re going down. Come on Bad, let’s teach these two a lesson.”

Bad let out a little whoop of joy, texting the impromptu scavenger hunt list to the group chat and hurriedly rushing the dishes over to the sink. “Team Muffin Dreams!” he said brightly, grabbing his jacket and stuffing his arms through the sleeves. “We’re gonna meme you guys so hard!”

He hooked his arm around Dream’s, practically dragging the taller man outside. Dream just did his best to keep up, pulling out his phone to check the scavenger hunt list. It was mostly mundane things, like a picture of a wild animal or some kind of pastry. It was, admittedly, a fair enough way to get all of them out and around the town, though Dream was more focused on trying to figure out a winning strat than admiring the impromptu set up of the game.

Bad, however, seemed to have other plans.

“So!” he said, leading Dream into the small town, in the direction of what looked like a bakery. “I want to talk to you about what’s up with you and George. He seemed really upset last night, and you guys barely talked all morning. What’s wrong?”

If someone as oblivious as Bad could pick up on the awkward tension, then it certainly wasn’t just in Dream’s head. “I dunno,” Dream said, glancing back at this phone, if only so he could avoid eye contact. “It’s whatever. So, for the scavenger hunt, I think it would be faster if--”

“Nope!” Bad interrupted him, stopping in the middle of the dirt road, crossing his arms sternly and turning to face Dream head on.

Dream stopped, laughing. “Pfft. What do you mean, ‘nope?’”

“I mean we’re going to have a talk about your feelings, and you aren’t allowed to do any muffiny distractions,” Bad said firmly, stomping his foot. “Something is bugging you, and we’re going to work through it together! No changing the subject.”

Dream crossed his arms too, tilting his head to the side. “It’s not like you can make me talk about it,” he said stubbornly.

Bad pouted, walking over to a small wooden bench and sitting down with a huff. “If you don’t talk about your feelings, I’ll sabotage our team and then tell Sapnap and George we lost because you’re a potato,” he said. It was such an unbelievably stupid threat. But damn it all if Dream was going to lose over something so petty.

Dream sighed, begrudgingly sitting down next to Bad. “To be honest, I barely know what’s going on. When George came to see me at the end of the manhunt, things were, like, really nice. He said something about being done with soulmates. I thought, maybe he said it because, you know.” Dream shut his eyes, his cheeks burning a dark red under the mask. “Because he wanted me instead, or something. But then, after the fight in the End, he got all standoffish and distant.”

A gentle hand rested on Dream’s shoulder, Bad opening his arms in an unspoken invitation for Dream to come closer. They leaned into each other on the bench, holding each other close. “And did you want him to want you?” Bad prompted. “I mean, do you want to be with George? Even if he isn’t your soulmate?”

Dream tried to reply, but the words tasted like glass on his tongue, too fragile and sharp to say aloud. He took a deep breath, forcing his thoughts into his mouth. “I love George. I love him *so* much Bad, it’s fucking killing me. But I’m never going to be as good as someone the universe chose specifically for him. He deserves his soulmate. Not some secondhand rejected asshole who can’t go outside without hiding behind some stupid mask,” he said, the energy in his voice fading, frustration dwindling away into soft-spoken heartache.

“Oh my goodness Dream,” Bad said, sighing. “There’s a lot on your mind, isn’t there? I may not be the biggest expert on these sorts of things, but I’ll try to give you the best advice I can.”

Dream forced a small smile. “I mean, you and your soulmate are actually together, so you’re

already doing better than I am.”

Bad paused for a moment, then shook his head firmly. “Geppy? Oh, no, I’m not dating him anymore. We broke up last night. I told him about our fight in the End, and because I lost he called me ‘Badboy noob’, then I told him he was a shorty, so we broke up. I’ll probably ask him back out in a few hours, though,” he said thoughtfully, and Dream began to sincerely doubt whether it was a good idea to take any romantic advice from Bad.

“Okay! That silly little muffin aside,” Bad said, clasping his hands together. “Skeppy and I have this really cool neighbor named Captain Puffy, and she’s usually away travelling, but when she’s not, she gives us advice. I think some of it could help you.”

Dream considered that, rubbing the back of his neck. “Wait, so you’re taking me to talk to some random person about my problems?” he asked warily.

Bad quickly shook his head. “No, it would take too long to go see her, even if we did ride Roberto,” he said. “But I’ve learned lots from her, so I can pass a few things on, I think. First of all! The big, number one rule for any relationship, whether it’s friend love or romance love or any love; communication is important,” he said firmly. “You need to talk! Fighting because of a misunderstanding is way worse than fighting just because you disagree. You need to be completely honest with how you feel.”

Dream grimaced, looking up at the sky. “That’s easier said than done,” he muttered. “What am I supposed to do? Walk up and say, ‘Hey Gogy, I’m in love with you! Please stop avoiding me!’”

“Yes,” Bad said seriously. “You joke about being in love with him all the time, it can’t be that hard to say it for real, right? And even if it is hard, you can’t start working things out until you both understand each other!”

Bad gave the answer so easily, as if acting on it weren’t the hardest thing in the world. “But what if I tell him how I feel and it just makes things worse?” Dream asked, running a hand through his own hair anxiously. “What if I misunderstood him and he wasn’t saying he liked me? What if I tell him how I feel and it makes him hate me?”

“George is a good person,” Bad said, smiling. “He wouldn’t hate you for caring about him! He’ll still be your friend, I promise. And if he doesn’t like you back the way you do... well, it might be really sad, but that’s okay too. It might hurt for a while, but you’ll always have friends. So tell him how you feel. No matter what he says, it’ll all be okay in the end. Pinky promise!”

Dream groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Okay, but like, how?”

Bad hummed thoughtfully. “You could ask him on a date! If it’s a fun casual date, it’ll be less scary for both of you and--gah, darn it!” He cut himself off, doubling over and grabbing his foot. “Oh my goodness!”

Dream raised an eyebrow, resting a hand on Bad’s shoulder. “Hey, you okay?” he asked.

Bad nodded, scowling. “Skeppy is just being a dunderhead. If he stubbed his toe just to get my attention, I swear, I’m going to be so angry!” he huffed, pouting as he pulled out his phone, typing into it with an impatient fervor.

The mention of Bad’s soulmate clicked something into place in Dream’s mind. Ah. He hadn’t warned his soulmate about the fight in the End. And he hadn’t checked in with them after either. *Fuck*. Even if he wasn’t in love with his soulmate, Dream did like them well enough, and he felt a surge of guilt soon followed the realization that they’d gone through the same pain. Bad had asked Skeppy if it was alright, warned him to take painkillers, checked in on him to make sure it wasn’t too much. Dream had kind of just left his soulmate to deal with it.

Maybe he should make sure they were alright.

Before he could consider that any further, though, Bad finished texting Skeppy, and was pulling Dream back to his feet with an exasperated smile. “Alright, now that you’ve talked about your feelings, we can get back to the treasure hunt! But if you don’t talk to George about this, well, oh my goodness, I don’t even *know* what I’ll do.” It was said in such a sweet, affectionately annoyed way, that it almost wasn’t vaguely ominous.

Still, Bad was right. Even if Dream feelings were unrequited, talking about it would at least clear the air. After the scavenger hunt he'd find a way, somehow, to ask George out. Or, at the very least, he'd make George talk to him about what was going on.

First, though, Dream figured he *really* ought to have a talk with his soulmate.

Chapter End Notes

srly if this fic is a bit off, i got a hate comment on one of my other fics and it rlly threw me off my rhythm :/ hope my mood didnt affect the quality of this chapter too much at least

anyway bbh supremacy <3 <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Dream reaches out to to his soulmate. The two of them try to find closure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

All things considered, the scavenger hunt ended up being surprisingly fun. Dream was still convinced he and Bad only lost because Sapnap knew more about the town, but in the end there had only been a few minutes' difference between each team completing the checklist.

Things were still tense, but at the very least, George seemed willing to look Dream in the eye. The four of them stood in Sapnap's kitchen, George and Sapnap arguing over what their victory forfeit would be while Bad made peanut butter sandwiches. Now and then Dream cuts in with a jab about them cheating, and the conversation devolves into playful bickering. It feels so good, so comfortable and right. It's almost possible to forget that anything was wrong. He could almost ignore the underlying thread of things unsaid still looming over every word..

Now and then, Bad would catch Dream's eye, giving him a look that fell somewhere between encouraging and impatient. Dream would just shrug, in reply, and go back to the conversation. He did plan on taking Bad's advice, just not yet. As terrifying as the prospect was, he was going to tell George everything, to try and make things right between the two of them again. No matter how much he loved George, they were friends first, and Dream would be damned if he let his own fear take that away.

But it felt wrong to try and cross that line right then and confess. Despite it all, Dream /did/ have a soulmate, one who was funny and caring and kind, and deserved to be happy. And, well, Dream had been a bit of an asshole to them, even if you didn't count the shared pain he'd dragged them through. No matter what would happen between Dream and George, it didn't seem right to try and move forward without first reaching out to his soulmate and at least trying to make amends.

He managed to get some time alone after lunch. Bad, Sapnap, and George were playing video games in the living room, while Dream disappeared back into the guest bedroom where he'd been staying. He'd pretend to be tired and said he was going to take a quick nap. It didn't seem like any of them really believed him, but they didn't press for answers, so he didn't give them any.

Locking the door, Dream stopped to take a deep breath. He sat down on the bed, taking off his mask and setting it to the side. Even knowing there was nobody here to see him, he still felt so

exposed. He rolled up the sleeve of his hoodie, exposing his own skin as a canvas to write on. He tapped his hand a few times, hoping to catch his soulmate's attention. After a moment, he began to write.

"We need to talk."

He waited, his heart beating quickly, filling the silence of the room with its anxious rhythm. For the longest time, it seemed like there'd be no response; that his soulmate had failed to notice the letters he'd drawn, or that they'd chosen to just ignore him. Anxiety started to well up like a leak in a boat, and he started to wonder if they'd rather he just leave them alone. Eventually, though, two letters were softly brushed against his skin.

'Ok.'

Dream let out a breath of relief, hurrying to gather his thoughts.

"Can I have your phone number? It might be a lot to say like this."

'I don't feel good giving you my number.'

"Okay. I'll try doing it this way then. First, I'm sorry."

'You already apologized. You love someone else, you want to be just friends, I get it. It's fine.'

"I also want to apologize for breaking my back."

'About time, you prick. You promised to stop falling off of things, remember?'

Dream bit his lip, fighting back a laugh. Their presence felt so comforting, so familiar. Was that just the nature of all soulmates? Or did he find them so likeable because they reminded him of George?

"I said 'no promises.' Seriously, though, are you okay?"

'...Honestly?'

There was a long pause. The writing came back, shakier, pressed deeper into the skin. It dug in enough to make Dream wince, but not so far that it seemed intentional, like they were trying to hurt him.

'No. I'm not okay. My whole life I've been waiting for you. Then once I think I'm finally over it, I actually talk to you, and you're incredible, and I'm so in love with you that it's honestly stupid. But I want you to be happy, and I've been trying, I've been trying so hard to fall out of love with you. But no matter how angry I get, no matter how much I try to focus on the bad, it doesn't work. I can't stop thinking about you. I can't stop loving you, Dream.'

Dream felt his breath catch in his throat. There were so many thoughts crashing through his head, like a flock of hummingbirds desperately fighting to break out of his skull. He tried to reply, but his hands felt leaden, like it was suddenly impossible to move.

'I promise I'm trying not to get in the way. I don't hate you, and I do want to be friends. I just need time to get over everything first.'

"I never told you my name."

No reply. Dream quickly scrawled another message.

"Come on, just talk to me. How did you know my name?"

'Forget I said that.'

"No way, how do you know? Have we met?"

'I wasn't going to tell you.'

"If you know then so should I! Do I know you?"

'Fine. Fine, I'll tell you. I'm in the same town, alright? I figured it out by accident, I saw you get hurt. Your friends were calling you Dream. I didn't want to say anything and make things weirder.'

"Holy shit. You're here . What's your name? Can we meet up?"

'Stop it. I told you, I'm not over this. It might be all fine and good for you to be just friends, but I need time, okay? I need space. I'm not ready.'

Dream was about to argue back, to point out how unfair it was that they knew who he was while he was just left in the dark. But he hesitated.

Dream was pushing them to talk to him when they were still struggling with their own feelings. Meanwhile it was so hard for him to confront the tension with George. It was hypocritical to expect his soulmate to put aside their own feelings just so he could say hello when he could hardly do the same.

Still, that did bring something to his mind. Dream rubbed his wrist self-consciously, biting his lip as he decided what to write next.

"Alright, then scratch meeting up. You don't have to come talk to me if you don't feel ready. But can I at least ask you something?"

'If it's like, "What's your name," or some question like that then definitely not. It ruins the whole point of not meeting you.'

"What? No, not that. It's just, now that you've seen me... you think I'm creepy?"

There was another long pause.

'In my defense, you wear a serial killer mask, and from what I've heard you literally play a murder game. So. I was creeped out at first, yeah, but you can't really blame me? Still, I am sorry you got stuck with a shitty first impression for your soulmark.'

"My mask is a smiley face, how the fuck is that creepy?"

'It's an ominous smiley face! Look, I said I'm sorry!'

"Can't believe you're scared by that, lmao."

'Shut up, I'm not scared! You're impossible.'

Dream smiled, rubbing his thumb across the phantom words. He felt an odd pang of bitter fondness. He was talking to the one person the universe had chosen specifically to love him, and for him to love in turn. And he could see it, too; imagining a future where he met his soulmate on better terms, where they ended up together. But for better or worse, Dream was making his own choice, the universe be damned.

He loved George. That was all there was to it, really.

"There's supposed to be a harvest festival this week," he wrote. "Are you going to go?"

'Maybe. My friends have been talking about it, but I might just stay home and sleep. Doesn't really

sound like my kind of thing.'

"Lazy ass, lol. I think I'm going to go. There's something I think I need to do. If you end up coming out too, have fun, ok?"

There was a pause, accompanied by the faintest sense of drumming fingers. 'You know what? If I do go, and you guess who I am, I'll let you know if you're right.'

"Is that a challenge?"

'Oh, for sure.'

"Then consider it already won."

'Your confidence is so annoying sometimes. Just try to be subtle about it, or my friends might kill you.'

"Wtf, what did I do to your friends?"

'They kind of hate you for breaking my bones all the time. Speaking of, one of them noticed we're talking and said to let you know you're a twink-ass bitch.'

"Lmao, I mean, that's fair. Don't worry, I'm great at not dying. I'll find you at the festival, for sure."

'See you there, green boy.'

Dream let out a deep breath he didn't know he'd been holding, flopping back into the soft bed with a small smile. It was a step forward. One way or another, he was going to find his soulmate. Even if he couldn't give them the love they deserved, he could be a damn good friend, and hopefully make up for the pain he'd caused them. What were the chances that they'd be in the very town where his best friend lived? Then again, maybe chance had nothing to with it. Soulmates were supposedly bound by "fate", after all. Still, the red string of fate had become so tangled it still

seemed almost unbelievable.

As daunting as it had been to reach out to his soulmate again, there was still another task ahead, one that he feared more than any of the fights for his life he'd faced again and again. He needed to tell George how he felt. He needed to figure out what this sudden hostility between them was, he needed to cross the distance. Even though the unlikely chance of George feeling the same way was thrilling, it paled in comparison to mending what had been broken. What mattered most was to make things okay. He just wanted his best friend by his side again. That was more important than being loved back.

Now, it was just a matter of figuring out how.

Chapter End Notes

ty all for the comments of support!! yall are so sweet im gonna cry qnq

sorry if this chapter is a little shorter! i didnt want to pad it out unnecessarily, and this was a bit of an important point in the story

my birthday is on the ninth, so i might be slower with fic updates this week! hopefully this chapter tides yall over for now ^^

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Dream confronts George. A confession.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream waited the rest of the day, impatiently watching for the right moment to break the ice. He wanted to get George alone. That way, if things went badly, there at least wouldn't be an audience.

But Dream couldn't just ask George to come talk to him in private, not without just making things even more awkward than they already were. Although he was starting to wonder if he'd have to just muster up his courage and say something, an opportunity did eventually come.

After dinner, Sapnap and Bad were sitting on the couch together, catching up. Sapnap was leaning over, watching as Bad showed him pictures on his phone and enthusiastically talked about his own home town. They were like a pair of brothers, reuniting after having lived apart for the first time. It was honestly pretty sweet listening to the two of them hang out.

As the evening had melted into idle chatter, George seemed to lose interest, eventually heading out into the backyard. Dream held his breath when the door closed behind George. He tried to relax his shoulders, pretending his heart wasn't already starting to pound. Bad and Sapnap both paused briefly, sharing a look with each other before looking at Dream.

"Dream," Sapnap said, leaning forward. "Are you going to go talk to George about...?" he left the end of the question empty, the unspoken words hanging distinctly in the air.

When Dream nodded, Bad smiled, though Sapnap seemed a bit hesitant. "Alright. You know I'm rooting for you man, but just... take it slow, alright? He's still pretty hung up on his dipshit of a soulmate," he said.

Dream took a deep breath, nodding again. "I won't hurt George," he promised. "I just need to clear the air."

“It’s not just George I’m worried about,” Sappnap said seriously. “I care about both of you, and sometimes when people are upset, they do dumb shit. Just be careful. For George, and for you.”

Bad leaned on the back of the couch, smiling brightly. “You both deserve to be happy. No matter what happens out there, we’ll all be friends, okay?”

Dream closed his eyes for a moment, doing his best to believe that Bad was right, that they’d make it through this. He was afraid, more afraid than in all his dumb exploits and reckless adventures. But he could take this risk. After all, wasn’t that what he did best? Taking his friends advice and keeping it close, Dream followed George out into the yard.

George had taken a seat on the hay bale they’d used as an archery target, his feet dangling a breath above the dewy grass. His white goggles were pushed back out of his face, pinning back his dark hair in a gentle wave, framing his face gently. The light of the setting sun caressed his skin, coloring him with soft pinks and golds. His eyes were a deep russet, as deep and dark as a cavern yet to be explored. His expression was distant and calm, as though his thoughts were drifting with the clouds overhead.

Dream opened his mouth to speak, but the words seemed to catch in his throat. It took him a moment to collect himself. He shoved his hands into his hoodie pockets in a hopeless bid to stop them shaking, forcing himself to take a deep breath in before he spoke. “Hi.”

George looked up quickly, meeting Dream’s eyes with a startled flush. “Oh, hey,” he said, clearing his throat and rubbing the back of his neck. “Do you need something?”

Dream nodded sheepishly, trying to gather his words. God, he should have planned what he was going to say ahead of time. “Yeah. So, uh. I know things have been weird since the manhunt, so I thought we should talk.”

George bit his lip, tearing his eyes away, staring out at the tree-lined horizon. “I don’t really want to talk about it,” he said, folding his arms, hugging himself tightly. “I know I’m being an asshole, but I just can’t do it right now.”

“We don’t have to talk about the manhunt or what happened,” Dream said quickly, taking a step closer. “I get it if you aren’t ready. But we do need to talk. You’re my best friend George, I’m not just going to stop talking to you completely. You’ve been avoiding me ever since we got back to the overworld, and it fucking sucks. I know I haven’t been completely open with you either, but I want to change that. I want things to work out between us, George.”

George still kept his gaze averted, though the traces of sadness in his eyes were impossible to miss. He looked so soft, so sorrowful. Dream felt his heart aching for George. "I guess," George said slowly. "That's fine."

It wasn't exactly an invitation, and it was frustrating how little George was willing to give, but Dream would take what he could. He took a deep breath, walking over to stand by the hay bale, by George. They were close enough one could just lean over and their shoulders would touch, but neither closed the distance, waiting for the other to make the first move. "When we were together in the stronghold," Dream said slowly, taking a deep breath. "I'm not sure if you know how much that meant to me, George." He waited for George to say something, but he was only met with silence. Dream pushed forward, his pulse quickening. "Maybe it was more important to me than it was to you, and that's fine, you don't have to feel the same way. But I can't get that moment out of my head. I can't get *you* out of my head."

"It meant a lot to me too," George said, his voice quiet, reserved. "I'm glad I have friends who care about how I feel."

Dream closed his eyes. He was standing on a precipice, faced with the threat of a long fall. He'd stood there for so long, waiting, hoping for some sign that there'd be a safe landing, unable to see the bottom. But if he didn't take the jump now, he never would. All he could do was take that one step forward and pray someone would catch him.

"George, I think you know I mean more than just that," he said softly.

"Yeah," George said. "I do."

God, it was so unfair that George could keep his voice so even, that he could keep his expression so calm. Was he angry? Disappointed? Embarrassed? Words spilled out of Dream's mouth, bursting out like a broken dam, hoping that if he just said enough George would tell him how he felt. "I think I've been in love with you for a long time," he said. "Fuck, if this isn't what love feels like, then I don't know what would. You mean more to me than I know how to put into words." He clutched at his chest, as if he could grab his heart tightly enough to force it to slow down. "I would never want you to feel weird or uncomfortable, and you don't have to feel the same way. I don't want to force you into anything you don't want, but if it's going to push us apart like this, I need to tell you. None of it matters if I lose you as a friend, George."

For far too long, the two of them sat in silence. Dream watched George, wishing that the other would just look him in the eye, would yell or run or do /something/ that would give away what he was feeling. But George didn't move, didn't speak, only stared out at the setting sun with those

soft, sad eyes.

Eventually, he spoke, his voice soft and resigned. "I think I love you too. But... it's a bad idea, Dream."

It felt like flying. It felt like falling. Dream was all at once completely lost, and somehow feeling like he'd finally been found. He was weightless, breathless, balanced on a razor wire between heartbreak and blinding joy. "If it's because we aren't soulmates, who cares?" he said, grabbing George's hand in his, holding it tightly. "I never wanted a soulmate anyway--I just want you!"

George finally met Dream's gaze, his eyes pained and lost, glassy with the threat of tears. "That's not how this is supposed to go," he said softly, locking his fingers with Dream's, holding onto him like a lifeline in a storm. "Maybe you want me now, but sooner or later, you're going to be disappointed."

Dream squeezed George's hand tightly, lifting his free hand to cup George's cheek. "George, I say this in the nicest way possible, but that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say. And that's nothing to sneeze at," he said, snorting.

"Oh my god, you're so annoying," George said softly, closing his eyes and leaning into Dream's touch.

"I'm not going to be disappointed in you," Dream said, running his thumb across George's cheek. "If you feel the way I do, you have to give this a chance. Go with me to the harvest festival."

George hesitated, glancing down at his own wrist, at the affectionate soulmark scrawled there. His expression was bittersweet, his silence telling. "If I agree... we have to keep one rule, okay? Either of us can back out at any time, no strings attached."

Dream broke into a smile, bending over, pressing his forehead against George's with a laugh of relief. He had no plans on backing out himself, but if that was what George needed to feel comfortable, then it was fine by Dream. "Of course. Whatever you need," he promised.

George smiled, though he still seemed apprehensive. God, it was maddening to see him like this, so convinced that he somehow wasn't enough, that anything in the world could make Dream love him less. Whatever it was that kept George so wary, Dream would do whatever it took to protect him. "I love you, George," Dream said softly.

It was heartbreaking how utterly unconvinced George seemed to be.

Chapter End Notes

sorry its been a little while! been struggling with writing lately, and i didn't want to post an unpolished chapter. still not thrilled with how this one turned out, and its is shorter than i'd like, but i gotta get off my perfectionist butt and just keep going! future updates may be a bit slower, at least until my motivation gets pumping again ouo

looking forward to the next few chapters! we're getting closer to the climax and the reveal ^-^

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The night begins. An unexpected visitor arrives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“C’mon, you look fine,” Sappnap groaned, flopping back against the guest bed in Dream’s room. “You don’t need to worry so much. This is *George* we’re talking about. He’s seen you covered in blood and shit, I really doubt he’s gonna call things off if you don’t look perfect.”

Dream rolled his eyes, still fiddling with the buttons of the white dress shirt he’d bought the day before. Sappnap had taken him shopping, helping him pick out some new clothes so Dream could wear something a little less bloodstained to the festival. He wore his green jacket over the shirt, unzipped, and a pair of clean black slacks with a dark grey trim. He’d even taken the time to scrub the layers of dirt and grime from his mask until it was white as new. “I know, I know,” he said, still focused on the mirror and as he ran his hands through his hair, trying to brush it back. “I just want to look nice for him.”

Sappnap snorted, sitting up and scooting to the edge of the bed. “Absolute simp behavior. Seriously, though, it’s going to be fine Dream. It’s not like you’re gonna make a bad first impression, right? You’ve known George for years. Just because you’re in the same place doesn’t change anything.”

A bad first impression. That reminded Dream—there was a chance he would meet his soulmate tonight. He took a deep breath and tried to wave the thought off. As nice as it would be to finally meet his soulmate and maybe even strike up a friendship, tonight his priority was George. More than anything, he wanted to prove to George that he really did want this. He wanted George to feel loved.

“Alright,” Dream said hesitantly, taking a deep breath. He turned back to face Sappnap, managing a small smile. “God, I feel so dumb for being nervous. How come going on a date feels more intense than playing manhunt?”

Sappnap got up, shoving Dream playfully. “Because you’re a masochist and this isn’t the ‘fun’ kind of pain,” he teased, throwing an arm around his taller friend’s shoulders.

“Oh my god, you are so annoying,” Dream groaned, trying not to smile as he pushed Sapnap's arm off. Smoothing his jacket one more time, Dream crossed the room, taking hold of the doorknob. He hesitated a moment, shooting a quick look back at his best friend. Sapnap just grinned, grabbing Dream's hand and opening the door for him, pushing Dream out into the hallway.

Bad was waiting for them in the living room, dressed in a gray pencil skirt and an oversized red and blue hoodie so big the floppy sleeves covered his hands. He was bouncing up and down impatiently, and lit up when Dream and Sapnap came in. “You two look great!” He said brightly, leaning over to smooth the collar of Sapnap's shirt, tidying him up like a parent fussing over a messy child. “George said he'll be a few more minutes, then we can go out to the festival!”

“We can go now.” The familiar voice, the stupid accent, that audible smile; Dream could feel his heart swell. George stepped into the hallway, greeting them with that dumb sheepish smile. He looked effortlessly pretty, dressed in a brilliant blue linen button-down with the collar open, his dark brunette hair falling into a soft curl. His white goggles were pushed on his head like a crown, making it impossible not to notice his warm eyes, his dark lashes, his pale freckles. And for once, Dream didn't begrudge George's soulmate for being instantly swept up at the sight of a pretty face, because *holy fuck*, who wouldn't look at George and be swept away? George looked up at him, still smiling, but the expression was drawn, trying to hide a faint trace of worry. “Are you going to say something, or are you just going to stand around gawking?” George joked.

Dream sputtered, putting up a hand to his mask, grateful no one could see how red his face had gone. “I wasn't—I wasn't ‘gawking’, shut up!” he said, wheezing. “Just because you're used to pretty privilege doesn't mean everyone's staring at you all the time.”

George snorted, tilting his head to the side. “Pretty privilege? What are you on about?”

“I'm saying you're pretty,” Dream said. Maybe he was testing his luck a bit, but something about being with George made him want to put his whole heart on the line—and just seeing George's flustered smile made the risk worth it.

Sapnap threw one arm around Dream and the other around George, pulling them both in. “Alright, you guys have a whole night to act all cute and gross, but the point of coming to town was for all four of us to hang out. You two have to stick with Bad and me for at least an hour, then you can sneak off to do disgusting couple shit, got it?” he said, only half-teasing. Dream was grateful for the bit of interference—he had been looking forward to hanging out with the whole Dream Team after all, and this way they could start the night off casually, with less pressure on all of them.

Bad grabbed Sapnap's wrist and started leading the group to the front door impatiently, eagerly asking about everyone's favorite festival foods and what they hoped to see that night. Dream and George followed, hanging back a bit, their shoulders brushing in the narrow hallway. As Bad

hurried eagerly out the door, Dream caught George by the hand.

George tensed for a moment, looking up, his eyes searching, as though trying to find some sort of clue in the mask. They stood there in silence, each waiting for the other to move first. Eventually, Dream cleared his throat, giving George's hand a small, reassuring squeeze. "I'm standing by what we said, okay? If at any point it gets to be too much, or you don't want to keep going, just say so."

"Same goes for you," George said seriously. "If you decide you don't want to be around me—"

"I appreciate the thought, George," Dream interrupted, "But that's fucking stupid. I'm always gonna want to be with you, no matter what. Even if it's just as your friend, got it?" He softened, nudging George and trying to bring the mood back up. "You aren't getting rid of me that easily Gogy. You're gonna have to try a little harder."

George's concern eased into a wary smile. "Damn, that's too bad," he said drily. "Let's get going, I want to find that funnel cake Sapnap was bragging about."

Starting the night off as a group of four had been a good call, the Dream Team quickly falling into a comfortable rhythm of banter and laughter. Ducking through the narrow streets of festival stalls, racing to find the next most interesting thing, it all fell into place as naturally as breathing. Bad split off from the group to buy them all funnel cakes and festival souvenirs, while Sapnap dragged the other two to a street filled with bright lights and colorful prize-laden stalls. Based on the cheers and gasps and clattering of balls, rings, and bottles, anyone could tell this street had been dedicated to all sorts of games of skill and chance.

Sapnap beat them both squarely at the basketball toss, and although they all took turns at the strength-testing machine, Dream couldn't help being quietly pleased that he'd gotten closest to hitting the bell. They spent an honestly unreasonable amount of time at a children's game where you were meant to guess which colored cup a pachinko ball would land in—probably because it made for plenty of chances to joke about George's colorblindness.

(Maybe teasing your date wasn't the best "date etiquette" or whatever, but Dream couldn't care less if it meant listening to George's laugh.)

The stall that catches Dream's eye is relatively plain in its decoration, with the main draw being wooden cut-outs placed some twenty yards back, each plank painted with bright cartoon animals and red and white targets. Dream grabs George by the shoulder, eagerly pointing out the stall. "George, look! It's an archery game!"

George glanced at the stall, pulling a grimace. “Ew. I’m still sore from manhunt.”

“Sore about losing,” Dream joked. Before George or Sapnap could spark back up the argument over who’d technically won, he continued, “Come on, I want to see how your aim’s been improving! Just a quick little three-way competition. Please?”

George eyed up the flimsy bows the archery game had set out, wrinkling up his nose. “I think I’ll pass.”

Sapnap playfully shoved past George, tossing an emerald to the lady manning the stall and picking up a bow and arrow. “Leave him be, Dream. Gogy just doesn’t want his date to see him getting his ass kicked,” he said, mischief glittering in his eyes.

Unsurprisingly, this got just the reaction Sapnap had probably been hoping for; with a scowl, George stomped over to the stall, grabbed one of the cheap bows, and slammed an emerald down on the counter. “Fine. Dream, you too,” he said snappishly, shoving the last of the game bows into Dream’s chest. “The more people humiliating Sapnap the better.”

Dream bit back laughter, lining up with George and Sapnap. The lady running the stall gave them each a broad smile, crossing her arms over her chest. “You each get three arrows. The farthest targets score you more points, and if you’re enough of a sharpshooter, you can take a prize home with you,” she said, motioning to a rack of large neon-colored plushies. “Fire at your ready, boys!”

Sapnap shot first, easily hitting two of the middle-ranged targets nearly in the center. His third arrow flew to a further target on the edge of the treeline, a bit further from the bullseye but still a clean shot. Dream grinned, clapping Sapnap on the back lightly. “Looks like your aim’s gotten a little rusty, Pandas,” he joked.

“What, I buy groceries and set up guest rooms for you guys and this is how you thank me?” Sapnap said, playfully elbowing Dream in the ribs. “Next time you come visit I’ll practice archery while you look for an inn room, asshole.”

Dream wheezed, shaking his head. He looked down at the flimsy bow in his hands, lifting it up and knocking an arrow. He loosed it at a middle range target, surprised to find the arrow didn’t strike quite right. “Oh, wow, the aim on these are awful,” he said, examining his second arrow, now taking note of all the sways and dents in the wooden shaft.

“It’s a carnival game, Dream,” George said, untying his own bow string with a smug grin. “What did you expect?”

Dream shook his head, shooting George a cocky grin. “That’s not gonna stop me from winning. See, I have to score the best so I can win a prize for my date,” he teased, loosing his second arrow—much closer this time. He was fairly sure he could secure a win over his friends so long as he landed this last shot on a far target, so for the third time Dream raised his bow.

His gaze followed the arrow shaft, lining up his aim carefully. But as he adjusted, his eyes drifted down, coming to rest on George. It was hard not to lose focus, watching George’s dark eyes shine with determination, his strong nimble hands restringing the carnival bow tighter than it had been before. He wanted to hold those hands in his own. He wanted to kiss George’s soft warm palms, lace his hand through those long fingers, to know those hands better than he knew his own, if only for the sake of being close to George. The thought made him feel soft. The softness eased his grip. The arrow slipped through his fingers, missing the targets entirely and disappearing into the woods.

“Fuck!” Dream cried out, burning up under the mask as George and Sapnap broke down laughing. “Wait, no, that doesn’t count, George made me miss!”

Sapnap doubled over cackling. “How? He didn’t even touch you!”

Dream pouted, tossing the carnival bow back down on the stand. “It’s—he was being distracting!” He turned on George, trying to scowl and not give in to the contagious laughter. “This is your fault! I can’t believe you would weaponize your pretty privilege like this, I trusted you!”

George grinned, his face dusted pink, his dark eyes shining playfully. “Again with the dumb ‘pretty privilege’ thing? That’s not a thing, shut up.”

“It is!” Dream insisted, laughter cracking his mock offense. “People do what you want because you’re good looking!”

Sapnap elbowed Dream in the ribs. “Just because *you* can’t say no to George doesn’t mean he has some special mind control power over the rest of us,” he teased. “Come on, George, you’re up to shoot. You aren’t just a pretty face, are you?”

George smirked, notching his first arrow, loosing it into a target with precise aim. “What, jealous you don’t have my skills or my good looks Snapnap?” He said, his eyes shining with a competitive spark.

It wasn’t hard to see that George was good. He’d been fairly well self-taught before Dream’s advice, and now that he’d put those stance changes into practice, his talent was only all the more obvious. Dream could hardly feel bad about his own embarrassing missed shot when it meant he got to admire how much George was improving.

The second shot struck true as well, so barring any embarrassing mistakes, George’s score was set to compete with Sapnap. As George reached for his last arrow, Bad finally made it back to the group—a paper plate of funnel cake in each hand, and four colorful flower chains hung on one arm. “Oh, looks like I’m just in time! Good luck George!” He cheered, trying to wave without dropping anything.

George offered Bad a quick smile before turning his attention to the range of targets, aiming for one further in the back. He squared his shoulders, lined up his shot, and loosed the arrow. It lodged itself in the target with a satisfying thunk, chipping the red paint beneath.

“Congratulations!” cheered the woman manning the stall, ringing a hand bell. “That’s enough points to pick a prize. What would you like young man?”

While Sapnap bemoaned his loss, George walked over to the rack of prizes, considering it for a moment before pointing out a giant yellow plush in the shape of an axolotl. “That one, please.” The woman handed George his prize with a warm smile.

Dream sighed dramatically, walking over and slumping up against George, resting his chin on the shorter man’s head. “Gogy, I was going to win you something. You’re making me look like a terrible date, have some sympathy.”

George laughed, shoving Dream off. “Oh my god, you’re so annoying,” he said, the corners of his eyes crinkled up affectionately. “Maybe I wanted to win something for you, ever think of that?”

“Wait,” Dream said, narrowing his eyes. “Really?”

“No,” George said smugly. He turned sharply on heel, taking one of the plates out of Bad’s hand and pushing the giant stuffed animal on him instead. “Here you go, Bad, I won this for you.”

Bad squealed, doing his best to hug the plushie even though his hands were full. “George you muffin, I can’t accept this! Where would I even keep him? Oh my goodness, I’m naming him Mister Nibbles, he’s so cute!”

Sapnap laughed, doing his best to herd them all down the street, grabbing Bad’s other plate. “Dude, you’re gonna get powdered sugar everywhere! Come on, there’s an empty place over there, we can sit down on the grass and eat.”

“Oh!” Bad lit up, doing his best to hold Mister Nibbles with just one arm, holding the flower chains out with his other. “I almost forgot! While I was waiting for our funnel cakes, I bought everyone flower crowns! The cornflowers are mine, Sapnap the fluffy white one is for you—I think the lady called them chrysanthemums? Then sunflowers for Dream and poppies for George! You guys don’t have to wear them, I just thought it’d be really cool if we all matched!”

Sapnap set the funnel cake down, eagerly grabbing his flower crown and setting it on his head. “Aw hell yeah! C’mere Bad, let me help tie yours.”

Once all of them were crowned and splitting one of the plates of funnel cake, the company lapsed into easy conversation, playful teasing and familiar jokes set to the music of the festival. Dream’s hand drifted to the side, brushing against George’s, the two of them sitting close as they bickered and laughed. It didn’t even occur to Dream that he’d meant to keep an eye out for his soulmate. How could he think about anyone else when George was right there in front of him?

“Oh my god, you have powdered sugar all over your face,” Dream wheezed, watching George finish off the funnel cake. “You look so dumb.”

George, bastion of maturity and grace that he was, stuck out his tongue at Dream. “Rich coming from the asshole with the smiley mask.”

Dream scooted closer, biting back laughter. “Shut up, it’s cool! It makes me look, like, enigmatic or something. Hold still, let me get the sugar off,” he said, licking his thumb and reaching over to try and wipe it over George’s cheek.

George giggled, shoving Dream back, his face dusted pink beneath the powdered sugar. “Ew, stop, you’re worse than Bad!” He said, his voice splitting into a flustered squeal. “It’s fine, I can wipe it off myself, god!”

“Come on!” Dream said, grinning as he leaned in closer, trying to reach the smudged sugar. “Stop moving, I’ve almost got it!” He kept trying to reach, only to lose his balance. He crashed into George, knocking his friend to the ground. Dream froze. He was pinning George to the ground. They were pressed up against each other. George had been so hesitant, if Dream had crossed a line —

But George looked up at Dream, his eyes soft, smiling and laughing with fond annoyance. “God,” he said quietly, “You’re so fucking obnoxious.”

Dream’s heart missed a step, and despite his hesitation, his worries and his caution, his eyes drifted down to the flecks of sugar still on George’s lips. He finds the distance between them growing smaller and smaller, finds himself starving to steal the sugar with a kiss. Even as he moves on instinct, he approaches slowly, giving George plenty of time to stop him or pull away. But George is sitting up, and he’s coming closer too, close enough Dream can smell the sweet fried funnel cake on his breath.

They nearly kiss.

Down the street people start shouting and yelling, carts and stalls being knocked around as a giant horse barrels down the street at top speed. Dream and George both scramble back, the shared moment ruined by the sudden chaos. The horse gallops down the entire street, nearly running over Dream, George, Sapnap and Bad. Far too close for comfort, though, the rider finally gets a grip on the reins, yanking the horse to a stop with a smile that’s half-way between terrified and manic.

The rider was a short man with eyes an unnatural electric shade of blue, matched only by his dyed hair and the patches of gemstone that seemed to grow from his skin. He swung off the horse, barely landing in the grass before he took off running, arms open wide. “Baaaaaad!” He screamed, tackling Bad to the ground before anyone could get between the two of them.

“Oh my goodness!” Bad squealed. “Skeppy, why’d you ride Roberto all the way here? Actually, why are you here in the first place you muffinhead!” He asked, giggling as he tried to sit up under the other man’s weight.

“You didn’t mean it right?” Skeppy wailed—Dream was pretty sure the tears were mostly fake, but Bad didn’t seem to care, snuggling his soulmate close. “You aren’t really dumping me right Bad?”

Bad sighed dramatically, blushing as he pressed a quick chaste kiss against Skeppy’s cheek.

“You’re such a clingy potato, oh my goodness! I didn’t mean it for real Skeppy, I still love you. We aren’t breaking up. I promise,” he said, not even trying to hide his smile.

Skeppy nodded, feigning seriousness. “Well, you really hurt my feelings. So now I’m breaking up with *you*.”

Bad gasped, reeling back. “What!? You mean little hamburger! No, I’m breaking up with you!”

“I called dibs on breaking up,” Skeppy said, standing up and pulling Bad to his feet. “And now that we’re not dating—Badboyhalo would you do me the honor of being my boyfriend?”

Sapnap snorted, rolling his eyes as he got up too. “Oh my god, you two are like this in person too? Disgusting,” he said jokingly. “I’ll take that as our cue to split up. George, Dream, have a good time. Bad, have fun. Skeppy, if you hurt him I’ll hunt you down and kick your ass. If any of you need me, I’ll be catching up with Quackity.” With that, he turned and headed off into the town, disappearing down another street and out of sight. Sapnap had hardly left when, as suddenly as he’d arrived, Skeppy was whisking Bad away on horseback for an unplanned date night.

Just like that, all that was left of the friend group was George and Dream, still sitting close to one another in the grass trying to process what had just happened. With little warning or chance for preparation, the two of them had been left alone.

Now, it was only George and Dream.

Now, it was only them.

Chapter End Notes

Hey!! Long time no see! I'm not thrilled with this chapter, which is probably why it took me so long to get it out in the first place. Sorry if it's a bit more rough around the edges! ^^ I might have never managed to drag through all my creative block and lack of motivation if it weren't for all of yall being so lovely and supportive in the comments

Hope you guys enjoyed this nice happy fluff <3 Figured you might need a calm before the storm

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's no discomfort. There's no obvious uncertainty or hesitation, no friction as everything fits into place. Even while everything between them was changing, they were both the same, still just Dream and George.

"Slow down, I can't keep up with your humongous steps," George complained, practically being dragged through the woods by his hand. "Where are we going anyway? You still haven't told me. This is like, basically kidnapping."

Dream wheezed, shooting a glance over his shoulder, grinning at George unapologetically. "Shut up, you're going to love this."

George rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide an annoyed smile. "Bad and Sap leave and you immediately drag me into the woods? C'mon Dream, slow down. Like, you could at least buy me a fancy dinner first," he joked.

Dream slowed to a stop, adjusting his mask to try and catch his breath through giggles, glad he could hide how red he'd gone. "I'll buy you a million dinners if that's what you want," he said. And maybe he'd meant it to be a joke, but god, every word Dream spoke around George came out sounding so genuine and devoted, it was embarrassingly obvious that he wasn't exaggerating. "Look, trust me, this is worth it. We saw all the coolest carts and festival stuff already, but this is going to be a one-of-a-kind experience! I swear."

"Yeah, well if I'm not impressed I'm going back to Sapnap's place and going straight to sleep," George said. Dream stopped at the foot of a looming oak tree, turning to George with a face of mock betrayal.

"Would you really stand me up halfway through our first date?" George smiled smugly, giving Dream's hand a light squeeze.

"Guess you'll have to find out, won't you?" he said. "We'll just see how it goes when we get wherever it is you're dragging me."

"Well I hope you're impressed," Dream said, dusting off his hands and looking up at the tree.

“We’re here.”

George looked up at the tree, frowning as he tried to figure out what was so special about it. “Dream,” he said, “Did you take into the forest to show me a normal oak tree? We could look at a million trees from Sapnap’s house. This is stupid.”

Dream grinned, elbowing George lightly. “Stop pouting. I’m telling you, this is worth it.” Dream took a few steps back, then ran at the tree, kicking a few feet up the trunk and catching himself on a branch. He swung up with ease, though he wobbled a bit before catching his balance. Right as he was turning around to offer George a hand up, George landed lithely on the branch next to him, barely a second behind Dream. Without either of them suggesting it, the climb became an impromptu race to up the tree, the two of them playfully pushing and shoving as they tried to be the first to the top.

Near the top, Dream grabbed onto George’s sleeve, laughing a bit despite his short breath. “Okay, okay, stop climbing, this is the spot.” He led George over to a wide branch, just barely sturdy enough to hold their combined weight. Dream sat down, legs dangling off the edge, and patted the empty space next to him. Taking the cue, George sat there, looking around curiously.

“I saw this spot during the manhunt, and I came back to check it out later,” Dream said, brushing a leafy bough out of the way. “When Sapnap was talking about the carnival thing, I thought it’d be the perfect place to—”

Before he could finish explaining, the sky lit up like a new sun. A bright green firework lit the sky blue for a brief flash, a loud bang followed by crackling, the afterimage burnt into their eyes. A volley of fireworks began, turning midnight into a colorful faux morning. George pushed his goggles back up his head to get a better look at the fireworks, his eyes going wide, reflecting the starbursts in beautiful dancing patterns. His jaw dropped, his mouth slipping into a small “o” of surprise.

“Wow,” George said, smiling as he watched the show, awestruck. “We must have the best view!”

Dream, only watching the fireworks as they cast colorful light on George’s face and were mirrored in his eyes, found he couldn’t help but agree.

Eventually, as all things do, the moment came to an end. Sapnap had told Dream the town’s firework shows lasted nearly half an hour, but it seemed to have passed in an instant. To be fair, he hadn’t been watching most of it anyway.

George watched the sky for a few minutes longer after the fireworks faded. Slowly, he looked down, his hands in his lap, his expression wistful, but guarded. He gently ran his thumb across his wrist, as though soothing himself. Dream followed his gaze, down. He could feel the excitement in his heart quickly dim like the afterglow of a fading firework. George was looking at his soulmark.

Dream's stomach turned, and he forced himself to look away. "Sapnap mentioned your soulmate hurt your feelings," he said. He wasn't sure why he brought it up now—worry? Jealousy? Anger?

"Yeah," George said quietly. "He— they were being kind of a dick. I get it, though."

Dream picked at a patch of bark, sullenly ignoring the splinters catching on his fingers. "Right. But it doesn't matter if they're an asshole because they're your soulmate, right?"

George frowned, shaking his head. "It's not like that, Dream. He's just been working through some shit, he's not a bad guy. It's complicated."

"What happened to you giving up on soulmates?" the question comes out almost pained. Dream looks away, lifting a hand to adjust his mask, his mouth uncomfortably dry. "If you didn't want to move on, you didn't have to agree to this. You could've told me no. We could've just stayed friends if you wanted. That'd be better than just... what's the point of all this if you're going to spend the whole time wishing I was some other guy?"

George's brow furrows, and he balls his hands into fists, his cheeks turning red. "I'm not! I do like you Dream. I know your soulmate hurt you, but this is *different*. I'm still trying to figure out how I feel about everything! Wouldn't you feel confused too if you knew your soulmate loved you?"

"I don't want to be forced to spend the rest of my life with someone just because it's fate!" Dream said, his voice rising. "Fate's ruined my life enough already. I want to choose the person I love, George!"

George looked back at him, not defiant or shaken, only... tired. Like he'd finally given up on some thought he'd been holding on to, but the burden had already worn him thin. "I can't do this with you right now, Dream. I'm going back to Sapnap's," he said quietly. After a moment's pause, he turned and dropped to a lower branch, making his way down the tree. Dream watched him go until he was out of sight.

God. That really couldn't have gone worse, huh.

Dream sat in the tree with his head in his hands, stewing in the bitter silence until he lost track of time. He *knew* he wasn't being fair to George. But knowing something was easier than feeling it. And Dream just felt... What? Angry? Lonely?

Jealous?

Fuck. He was jealous.

Jealous that George had a soulmate that made him feel wanted, maybe. But there was another, pettier side to it. He was jealous of George's soulmate, jealous someone could so easily steal away George's attention when Dream wanted it so badly. He'd been friends with George for years, but because of a faded mark sent by the universe, George spent more time thinking about some stranger. It was childish, it was petty, and it wasn't *fair*.

To be honest, Dream didn't want to apologize. The anger and the jealousy wouldn't leave him alone. But regardless of what he wanted, he'd pushed George away. He'd been an asshole. He needed to apologize. Just... maybe not tonight. George would probably want to be alone after that anyway. Tonight had probably ruined their chances at a relationship, but Dream would be damned rather than give up on their friendship.

Dream glanced down at his own wrist, at the letters marked there. He never found his soulmate. With George by his side, they had hardly crossed his mind. He hadn't even tried looking for them. He could only think about George; his confidence at the archery game, his laughter at Bad's terrible jokes, his smile under the light of the fireworks. He tried to imagine someone else in George's place, some mysterious nebulous soulmate he'd never had a say in. But it was still George's eyes, George's hands, George's smile.

He'd really fucked this up, hadn't he?

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's back! :D

I missed yall, seeing ur supportive comments has really been wonderful <3 Ive been

struggling with writing motivation for the past few months but I really do want to finish this story for yall, especially since we're so close! It might be slow going, but I promise not to abandon this story ^-^ If this chapter feels shorter or not quite as good as the others thats probly why rip

I've got some other ideas for fics I want to write, but whether I'll post them/when they'll update really depends on if I can get my writing motivation under check lol

Love you guys so much!! <3

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Dream tries to understand. It's too late.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream stayed in the tree alone for hours, stewing in his own thoughts. There was still time to go down to the festival and look for his soulmate, but after his fight with George even thinking about his soulmate made Dream feel sick. How ironic that he wanted his soulmate to be his friend, and his friend to be his soulmate.

When the festivities down below did start to die down and the chattering crowds finally began to thin, Dream let himself go back into town. It was long past midnight now. Stalls and booths were packing away their merchandise, people stumbled home holding hands and laughing about the fun they'd had, and the lanterns slowly began to peter out as the candles burned low. The streets, which had been packed tightly with enthusiastic people earlier that night, were now almost barren.

Dream walked aimlessly down the empty streets. He wanted to go home and sleep, but since everyone was staying over at Sapnap's house, he'd risk running into George. He had to give him space. Better to stay outside.

Time seemed to barely drag past, but somehow it seemed like the sky turned from black to dark blue in the blink of an eye. The sun had yet to reach above the horizon, but even just out of sight, it had begun to color the sky, a forewarning of the dawn. Finally, Dream started heading back to the house on the edge of town. He'd been awake for hours, and felt fairly certain there was no way George was still up. It was probably safe to head back.

It was a surprise to see Sapnap sitting on the porch. He was nursing a glass of water and a tired expression, but he smiled when he saw Dream, moving over and patting the step next to him. Dream took the invitation and sat down next to him.

"Rough night?" Sapnap asked, gently bumping his shoulder against Dream's. "No offense or anything, but you look like dog shit."

Dream took a deep breath in, adjusting his mask. "I could say the same about you," he said. There

wasn't much humour or bite to it. His voice sounded as tired and miserable as he felt.

Sapnap snorted, setting down his glass. "Yeah, but I'm a mess in the fun kind of way. I spent all night getting drunk with Quackity and some friends. You look like a mess in the sad kind of way. That, and George said he was going home early. Given that he didn't even wait for the sun to come up before leaving, I assumed that your whole date didn't go so well."

Dream propped his chin up on his hand, sighing. "Yeah." He felt guiltier now, hearing George had been upset enough to cut the group's get-together short. "I mean at first it was going great, but then the topic of soulmates came up, and I got jealous. I was a total dick to him, Sap."

"That makes sense," Sapnap said, nodding. "I mean, soulmates are a pretty touchy subject for both of you."

Dream frowned, shaking his head. "I don't get it. If he still wanted to be with his soulmate, why did he agree to go out last night?"

Sapnap shrugged helplessly. "It's complicated. I mean, his situation was different from you, right? His mark seems positive, but after he got in touch with his soulmate they kept sending mixed signals. They couldn't seem to decide whether they liked him or hated him. And even if he does want to move on, he's got to live with a permanent reminder of what should have been a perfect fairytale romance that didn't work out.

"When we were younger you told me that if your soulmate couldn't love you, then how could anyone else, right? George is dealing with shit like that for the first time. It's... fucked up, and it's complicated, and you're both idiots. You can't just use each other as a way to let out your pent up hurt over your soulmate. You either need to stay as friends, or figure out how to be together even if it's not what the universe planned for you. Just talk to each other. You're both adults, figure it out."

Dream groaned, resting his head on Sapnap's shoulder. "God. You make it sound so easy."

Sapnap snorted, affectionately tousling Dream's messy blonde hair. "Yeah, no. Knowing you two, easy isn't really on the table. Try and reach out to him sometime today, yeah? Last thing you need is leaving this shit to fester."

"It's so stupid," Dream muttered, closing his eyes for a moment. "Everyone says that your soulmate is suppose to make love easy. Literally, none of this is easy."

“You always were a try-hard,” Sapnap teased, clapping Dream on the back. He stood up and stretched, looking back down at Dream with a fond smile. “For real though, man. You and George are family to me. I want you guys to be happy. If there’s anything I can do, just say the word.” He ran a hand through his dark hair, squint up at the night sky. “Although right now, I think I’m gonna go crash in my room. I’m probably going to have a fucking nightmare hangover in a couple hours.”

Dream laughed. “Pfft, alright. Go to bed, idiot,” he said.

Sapnap shuffled back inside, leaving Dream out in the chill of the late autumn morning. The first golden flakes of sunlight were beginning to just barely pierce the trees, the promise of a coming sunrise. A cold breeze blew through, and Dream shivered, curling into the warmth of his hoodie.

He looked down at his hands, calloused and scarred from the often reckless life he lead. They felt strangely bare. It took Dream a moment of thinking to figure out why. Scars—although he had plenty of his own, his mind conjured up memories of phantom pains, of cuts and scratches that he never saw on his own skin. He ran his thumb over his palm absentmindedly. He’d never thought about it much, but he was fairly sure that if someone asked him to, he could trace every scar his soulmate had as if they were his own.

Why were people meant to love the person they shared scars with? Did it mean they were two halves of a whole, that they were brought together only by their pain?

Or maybe it was to be understood. Maybe it wasn’t two broken halves seeking each other out, but the comfort of having someone curled up against your side, recognizing you and all that you are. It was more than not being alone; it was being by the right person to not be alone with.

They knew his name after the fight against the dragon. They said they’d overheard it when he was in town, but the timing had lined up so neatly. Why was it that only then they’d become so distant? His first thought was to blame the soulmark on his wrist—they’d seen him, decided he was creepy, and stopped trying to reach out. But that didn’t line up, either. They’d seemed more guilty than judgmental, as if they thought he’d be happier if they pulled away.

There was something he was missing, something Dream’s soulmate knew that he still didn’t. He thought over every conversation they’d shared, trying to sort it all out.

Suddenly, Dream felt his body go weak. He collapsed against the porch, too stunned to scream, tears welling in his eyes. Pain surged through his body. He gasped for air, struggling to breathe.

His heart raced. Was this what a heart attack felt like?

Deep breaths. He needed to focus. Dream clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut tight. He forced himself to take slow, measured breaths. He tried to focus on the pain, seeking something familiar.

His head hurt badly, and his left leg felt like it had been broken. Worse than both, though, was the deep seeping pain that covered his entire back. The pain wasn't his. There wouldn't be any visible mark to show him what happened. He had to focus on the feeling. It was burning sensation, like he'd fallen backwards into lava, seeping deeper and deeper as the shock wore off. He was starting to recognize what happened when he felt an invisible arrow pierce his shoulder.

His soulmate was overwhelmed by mobs.

Dream staggered to his feet, gasping as he tried to keep his balance. He tried not to think about how impossible it would be to move if the wounds were his own, tried not to focus on the way the pain sunk deep and deeper. He managed to make it to the side of Sappnap's house. There was an axe leaned up against the wall, left outside to chop firewood. Dream slipped it into his belt. He wouldn't be fast enough on foot.

He looked over to the fence post where Bad's horse, Roberto, was tied, the large brown horse quietly grazing. Dream hurried over despite the pain, reaching out to frantically stroke Roberto's nose. Riding bareback while suffering from phantom wounds sounded like hell, but there was no time to cinch up a saddle and bridle. He quickly untied the lead. Bracing himself for the effort, he jumped up, swinging one leg over and settling on Roberto's back.

Dream kicked both heels into Roberto's side. Roberto, despite his confusion over the sudden early morning ride, took the cue instantly. He broke into a gallop towards the woods.

It was harder than Dream remembered riding without stirrups. Every stride Roberto took nearly knocked him off, the two hurtling through the wood at breakneck speeds. The horse seemed to understand the urgency, if not the cause for it. They never slowed, leaping over rocks and fallen trees, charging wildly through the forest.

The communicator rang at least four times before Dream finally picked it up, eyes still focused on the forest trail ahead. "I don't have time, Sappnap!" he yelled over the pounding of hoofbeats.

“Dream, listen, it’s an emergency!” Sappnap yelled. His voice crackled over the communicator, ridden with static and fear. “George left his shit at the house and he got ambushed by a creeper. He just sent a SOS to the group chat, he’s badly injured. We need to find him.”

“I know,” Dream said, his focus still on the forest ahead of him, still blindly riding in the direction of George’s hometown.

“What do you mean you know?” Sappnap asked. “Dream? Dream where are you?”

“I’ll get to him as fast as I can,” Dream said, breathless. “I don’t know if I’ll be enough. Sappnap, please. *Hurry.*”

Chapter End Notes

OKAY we are getting SO CLOSE! If I'm not mistaken, there'll be two more chapters + the epilogue! Since my time and motivation to write have gone down a lot I've had to pare back on ideas, but currently the plan is

1. Finish this fic!
2. Continue + finish Demon Prince (my Skephalo Beauty & the Beast AU)
3. Start publishing a fic I've been playing with for a while! No spoilers, but it's about pirates :D

As always, ily guys, thank u for the support!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!